

Between Worlds
The Collected Ile-Rien and Cineth Stories

by Martha Wells

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The Potter's Daughter

*This story takes place sometime before the events of the novel **The Element of Fire**.*

The potter's daughter sat in the late afternoon sun outside the stone cottage, making clay figures and setting them out to dry on the flat slate doorstep. A gentle summer breeze stirred the oak and ash leaves and the dirty grey kerchief around her dirty blond hair.

Someone was coming up the path.

She could hear that he was without horse, cart, or company, and as he came toward her through the trees she saw that he was tall, with dark curly hair and a beard, with a pack and a leather case slung over one shoulder. He was unarmed, and dressed in a blue woolen doublet, faded and threadbare, brown breeches and brown top boots. The broad-brimmed hat he wore had seen better days, but the feathers in it were gaily colored. Brief disappointment colored her expression; she could tell already he wasn't her quarry.

Boots crunched on the pebbles in the yard, then his shadow fell over her and he said, "Good day. Is this the way to Riversee?"

She continued shaping the wet clay, not looking up at him. "Just follow this road to the ford."

"Thank you, my lady Kade."

Now she did look up at him, in astonishment. Part of the astonishment was at herself, that she could still be so taken by surprise. She dropped the clay and stood, drawing a spell from the air.

Watching her with delight, he said, "Some call you Kade Carrion, because that is the sort of name given to witches. But the truth of the matter is that you are the daughter of the dead King Fulstan and Moire, a woman said to be the Dame of Air and Darkness of the fayre." He was smiling at her. His eyes were blue and guileless, and he had a plain open face.

Kade stopped, hands lifted, spell poised to cast. Names could be power, depending on how much one knew. But he was making no move towards her. Intrigued, she folded her arms and asked, "Who soon to be in hell are you?"

"I know all the tales of your battle with the court, the tricks you play on them," he told her, his expression turning serious. "But the story I tell of you is the one about the young gentlewoman of Byre, who died of heartbreak in the Carmelite Convent's spring garden when the prince of a rival city took her maidenhead and mocked her for it afterwards."

Kade lifted an ironic brow. "I remember the occasion. I didn't realize how entertaining it was. Finding an untidy dead woman in my favorite garden was not the high point of my day." It was incredible that he had recognized her; no one in their right mind would expect a half-fay half-human witch to be barefoot and wearing a peasant's muddy dress. As a rule the fay were either grotesquely ugly or heartbreakingly beautiful. Kade was neither. Her eyes were merely grey, her skin tended to brown or redden rather than maintain an opalescent paleness, and her features were unfashionably sharp. She had never looked like anyone expected her to look and this was why she had never expected anyone to recognize her when she didn't want to be recognized.

Oblivious, he continued, "You took on the appearance of the poor lady and waited there, and when the prince returned—"

"He found me instead, and we all know what happened to him then, don't we?"

"Yes," he agreed readily. "You found that the little idiot had consented, and that she had been as guilty of bad judgment and weak nature as he was guilty of being a rake. So instead of killing him you cursed him with a rather interesting facial deformity to teach him better manners."

Kade frowned, startled in spite of herself. She had never heard anyone tell the incident in that light. It was astonishingly close to her own point of view. "And what does that tell you?"

"That you have a sense of justice," he assured her, still serious. "I've told many stories of you, and it's one of the things about you that always impressed me."

Kade considered him carefully. He evidently knew his danger and didn't shrink from it, though he hadn't exactly dared her to be rid of him. It had been a long time since anyone had spoken to her

this way, with a simple fearless acceptance. Kade found herself saying, "She didn't perish dramatically of heartbreak, you know. She killed herself."

He shifted the pack on his shoulder and shook his head regretfully. "It's all the same in the end." He looked up at her, his gaze sharp. "But I'm here now to tell the story of the potter of Riversee who was murdered, and how you avenged her. I'm Giles Verney, a balladeer."

The balladeer part she could have guessed, but she still wasn't sure what to make of this man. *Surely he can't be simply what he seems*, she thought. People were never what they seemed. "Very well, Giles Verney, how did you know me?"

"There's a portrait of you in the manor at Islanton. It's by Greanco, whom you must remember, as he was court artist when—"

"I remember," she interrupted him. The only other portrait of her had hung in the Royal Palace in Vienne, and was probably long destroyed. Greanco was a seventh son and had the unconscious ability to put a true representation of the soul of his subject into his work. Kade could weave glamour into an effective disguise, but hadn't bothered for the inhabitants of Riversee, who had never seen her before. "You came here for the story of the dead potter."

Giles looked toward the door of the cottage. "I was in Marbury and heard about it from the magistrate there." He shook his head, his mouth set in a grim line. "It's a shocking thing to happen."

Maybe if I show him exactly how shocking it is he'll go away, she thought. She said, "See for yourself."

He followed her into the cottage with less hesitation than she would have expected, but stopped in the doorway. It was dark and cool and flies buzzed in the damp still air. The plaster walls were stained with dried blood and the rough plank floor littered with the glazed pieces of the potter's last work, mixed with smashed furniture and tumbled cooking pots. After a quiet moment he asked, "Do you know what did this?"

She hesitated, but his story of the gentlewoman of Byre alone had bought him this answer. "Yes."

Giles stepped forward, stooping to pick a piece of wooden comb out of the rubble. His face was deeply troubled. "Was it human?"

"I don't know. But you'd be surprised how often something like this is done by a man, despite the number of tales where giant hands come down chimneys." Kade rubbed the bridge of her nose.

She was tired and the whole long day had apparently been for nothing. She made her voice sharp, wanting to frighten him. "Now why don't you go away? This isn't a game and I'm not known for my patience."

He looked up at her, the death in the poor little room reflected in his eyes. As if it were the most self-evident thing in the world, he said patiently, "There has to be an end to the story, my lady."

Stubborn idiot, if you are what you seem, Kade thought wearily. "There might be no end. I've waited all day here and all I caught was you, a human mayfly."

His expression turned quizzical. "You're pretending to be another potter?"

"Clever of you to notice." Kade regarded the thatched ceiling sourly. The inhabitants of Riversee knew her only as the potter's daughter, come from another village to see to her mother's body and continue her craft. But now Giles' recognition of her made her wonder. Had she fooled anyone? Did the whole village whisper of it behind her back?

"Do you know why it was done?" Giles dropped the comb and got to his feet, dusting his hand off on his doublet.

She wouldn't give him that answer. "No."

"She was killed because potters are sacred to the old faith, or you wouldn't be here." Giles glanced around the room again, frowning in thought. "Could it have been the Church?"

Kade shrugged, scratching her head under the kerchief. "The local priest is about as old as his god's grandfather. I'm not discounting misplaced religious fervor, but he hasn't the strength or the temperament." As for the rest of Riversee, they might be baptized in the Church and pay their tithes regularly, but they still left fruit and flowers for the nameless spirits of the water and the wood, as well as the fay. Then she glared at him, because he had drawn her in again and she had hardly noticed.

Giles nodded. "That's well, but as you say, it's best not to discount it altogether. What do you plan next?"

She stared at him incredulously. "Are you mad?"

He smiled, with the air of someone waiting for a joke to be explained so he could laugh too. "Why do you say that?"

Kade clapped a hand to her forehead in exasperation. "In all the stories you've supposedly told of me, did it ever occur to you that I'm easily angered and don't appreciate human company?"

Apparently this hadn't occurred to him. He was aghast. "Don't you want the truth told?"

"Not particularly, no." Kade waved her arms in frustration. She still couldn't believe she was having this conversation.

"Why?" he demanded.

"Because it's my concern," she said pointedly.

"My concern is to tell tales. This would make a very good tale," he assured her, all earnest persuasion.

Gritting her teeth in frustration, Kade pulled a bit of yarn off her belt and knotted it into a truthcharm. The strands held together and she knew he believed what he said, and she was enough of a judge of character to know that he wasn't merely overdramatizing himself. She took a deep breath, flicking the charm away, and tried to reason with him. "That's all well and good, Giles, but I've made this my battle, and I don't need interference."

"People will tell things to a balladeer they wouldn't think of saying to any other stranger," he persisted. "I could be a great help to you."

Apparently reason worked as well with him as it would with the birds in the trees. "I don't need help, either." Exasperated, she stepped out of the shadowed cottage into the bright sunlight of the dirt yard.

He followed, the leather case he carried bumping against the doorframe with a suspicious twang. Kade hesitated, her attention caught. "What's in there?" she asked warily.

He patted it fondly. "A viola d'amore."

Despite her best intentions, she found herself eyeing the case, torn between caution and greed. Like all her mother's people, she had a weakness for human music. She conquered it and shook her head, thinking *if I wanted to trap myself, I would send just such a man. Inoffensive and kind, easy to speak to, with a legitimate purpose for being here.* "I want you to leave, on your own, or I'll make you."

"Is it trust? Wait, here's this." Giles set his pack on the ground, knelt to fish a small fruit knife out and used it to cut off a lock of his hair. He held it up to her. "There's trust on my part. This should be enough to show you that there can be trust on yours."

She took it from him mechanically. That was trust. For a man without any magical knowledge it was also the greatest foolishness. For someone who knew as much about her as he plainly did it bordered on insanity.

She sighed. He might have a touch of the sight; the best balladeers did. Whatever it was, she really couldn't see her way clear to killing him.

No need to tell him that immediately. She lifted a brow, regarding him thoughtfully. "Did you ever hear the story of the balladeer who spent the rest of his life as a tree?"

Kade led Giles through the crumbling town walls and into the cluster of cottages that surrounded Riversee's single inn. The small houses on either side of the rough cart track were made of piled stone with slate or thatched roofs, each in its own little yard with dilapidated outbuildings, dung heaps, and overgrown garden plots. The ground was deeply rutted by wagon wheels, dusty where it wasn't muddy with discarded slops. The nearby post road made Riversee more cosmopolitan than most villages, but the passersby still watched Giles narrowly. They had become used to Kade, and a few nodded greetings to her.

As they passed under the arched wagongate of the inn's walled yard, Kade said quietly, "Tell your stories of someone else, Giles. I can be dangerous when I'm embarrassed." She added ruefully, *And I've embarrassed myself enough, thank you, I don't need any help at it.*

He smiled at her good-naturedly, not as if he disbelieved her, but as if it was her perfect right to be dangerous whenever she chose.

The inn was two stories high, with a shaded second-story balcony overlooking outside tables where late afternoon drinkers gathered with the chickens, children, and dogs in the dusty yard. A group of travelers, their feathered hats and the elaborate lace of their collars and cuffs grimy with road dust, argued vehemently around one of the tables. To the alarm of bystanders, one of them was using the butt of his wheellock to pound on the boards for emphasis. Kade recognized them as couriers, probably from royalist troops engaged in bringing down the walls of some noble family's ancestral home. Months ago the court had ordered the destruction of all private fortifications to prevent feuding and rebellious plots among the petty nobility. This didn't concern Kade, whose private fortifications rested on the bottom of a lake, and were invisible to all but the most talented eyes.

Kade took a seat on the edge of the big square well to watch Giles approach the locals. The men seated at the long plank table eyed him with suspicion as the balladeer started to open the leather case he carried. The suspicion faded into keen interest as Giles took out the viola d'amore.

Traveling musicians were usually welcomed gladly and balladeers who could bring news of other towns and villages even more so. Within moments they would be fighting to tell him their only news—the grim story of the potter's death, or at least what little they knew of it. Kade stirred the mud near the well with her big toe. She was disgusted, mostly with herself. She knew why the potter had been killed well enough—to attract her attention.

In the old faith, the villages honored the fay in the hopes that the erratic and easily angered creatures would leave them alone. Riversee was dedicated to Moire, Kade's mother, and Kade could only see the death of the village's sacred potter as a direct challenge. A few years ago it might have pleased her, this invitation to battle, but now it only threatened to make her bored. She wasn't sure what had changed; perhaps she was growing tired of games altogether.

That night, seated atop one of the rough tables in the inn's common room, Giles picked out an instrumental treatment of a popular ballad, and watched Kade. She sat near the large cooking hearth in the center of the room, regarding the crowd with an amused eye as she tapped one bare foot to the music.

The inn was crowded with a mix of locals and travelers from the nearby post road. Both the magistrate and the elderly parish priest were in attendance; the first to count the number of wine jugs emptied for the Vine-growers' Excise and the second to discourage the patrons from emptying the jugs at all. Smoke from clay pipes and tallow candles and the heat of the fire made the room close and muggy. The din of talk and shouted comments almost drowned the clear tone of the viola, but whenever Giles stopped playing enraged listeners hurled crockery at him.

If Giles hadn't known better he would've thought the dim flickering light kind to the rather plain woman who called herself the old potter's daughter. But when firelight glittered off a wisp of

pale hair as she leaned forward to catch some farmer's joke, he saw something else instead. *The daughter of the spirit dame of air and darkness, and a brute of a king*, Giles thought, and added a restless undercurrent to the plaintive ballad. Smiling at his folly, he bent his head over the viola.

Over the noisy babble and the music there were voices in the entryway. Two men with a party of servants entered the common room. One was blond and slight, with sharp handsome features and a downy beard. His manner was offhand and easy as he said something with a laugh to one of the servants behind him. His companion could not have been a greater contrast if nature had deliberately intended it. He was tall, muscled like a bull, with dark greasy hair and rough features. Both men were well turned out, though not in the latest city style, and Giles labeled them as hedge gentry.

He also had a good eye for his audience, and saw tension infect the room like a plague in the newcomers' wake. There was muttering and an uneasy shifting among the local people, though the travelers seemed oblivious to it. In Giles' experience the nobility of this province were little better than gentlemen farmers and usually got on quite well with their villages and tenants, except for the usual squabbles over dovecotes and rights to the mill. Obviously the relationship in Riversee was somewhat strained.

Seated at the table Giles was using as a stage were the grizzled knife-grinder who worked in the innyard, a toothless grandmother that might have been a hundred years old, and a farmer in the village to sell pigs. Giles nodded toward the new arrivals and asked softly, "And who is that?"

The knife-grinder snorted into his tankard. "The big one is Hugh Warrender, the land owner. Some distant kin of the Duke of Marais."

"Fifth cousin, twice removed," the piping voice of the old woman added.

The farmer said, "Fifth cousin...? Quiet, you daft old—"

"The boy is Fortune Devereux," the knife-grinder continued, oblivious to his companions' comments. "He's Warrender's brother from the wrong side of the bed, come up from Marleyton."

"From Banesford," the old woman put in, almost shouting over the farmer's attempts to keep her quiet.

"He first came here two years ago." The grinder shrugged.

"Warrender's not well thought of, but Devereux's not so bad."

"Wrong!" The old woman glanced suspiciously around the room and lowered her voice to a shriek. "He's worse, far worse!"

Kade watched as a table was cleared for Warrender and his men near her seat beside the hearth, a process which involved a good deal of shouting, jostling, and imprecations. As the group argued with the landlord, her eyes fell on the blond Devereux. He was an attractive man, but she wasn't sure that was what had drawn her eye. There was something else about him, something in his eyes, the way he moved his hands as he made a placating gesture to the ruffled landlord. Whatever the something was, it made the back of her neck prickle in warning. She was so occupied by it that she was caught completely unawares when Warrender turned with a growl and backhanded a grubby potboy into the fire.

No time for thought or spell, her stool clattered as Kade launched herself forward. She landed hard on her knees, catching the boy around the waist before he stumbled into the flames.

Thwarted, Warrender snarled and lifted a hand to strike both of them. Kade knelt in the ashes, the fearful boy clutching a double handful of her hair. "Yes, it would hurt me," she said quietly to the madness in Warrender's face. "But it would also make me very, very angry."

Something in her face froze Warrender. He stared at her, breathing hard, but didn't drop his arm. The moment dragged on.

Then Fortune Devereux stepped forward, catching his brother by the shoulder. Past Warrender's bulky form, Kade met the younger man's gaze. Though his expression was sober, his eyes danced with laughter. Yes, she thought, her grip on the boy unconsciously tightening, *Oh yes. And now I know.*

The tension held as Warrender hesitated, like a confused and angry bull, then he laughed abruptly and let Devereux lead him away.

Kade felt the potboy shiver in relief and released him. He scrambled up and darted away through the crowd. She was aware that across the room Giles was on his feet, that an older man had him by the wrist, trying to pry a heavy wooden stool out of his hand. As Warrender and the others moved away, Giles forced

himself to relax and let the man take the makeshift club. He retrieved the viola from the table where he had dropped it and sat down heavily on the bench. She saw his hands were shaking as he rubbed at an imperfection on the instrument's smooth surface.

As the rest of his party took their seats, Devereux strolled over to the balladeer's table. He spoke, smiling, and tipped his hat. Giles looked up at him warily, gave him a grudging nod.

Kade looked away, to keep from betraying any uneasiness. Devereux had marked Giles' reaction, had seen him ready to leap to her defense. *That*, she thought, *cannot mean anything good*.

"What did he say to you?" Kade's voice floated down from the cavernous darkness of the stable's loft.

"Nothing." Giles had finished wrapping the viola d'amore in its oiled leather case. He was not sure when Kade had gotten into the loft or how. The stable, the traditional sleeping place of itinerant musicians and entertainers, was warm and dark except for the faint glow of moonlight through the cracks in the boards. The horses and mules penned or stalled along the walls made a continuous soft undercurrent of quiet snorts and stamping as they jostled one another. Straw dust floated down from above and into Giles' hair. He stretched slowly, trying to ease the knots out of his aching back. This had not been one of his better nights.

He knew he was a fool, but he would rather no one else know it; when Warrender had been a breath away from knocking Kade into the fire, he had come dangerously close to exposing his feelings. *She's the most dangerous woman in Ile-Rien*, he told himself ruefully, *she doesn't need your defense*. Except in his songs maybe, that spoke the truth about her when others lied.

"I know he said something to you, I saw his lips move," she persisted impatiently.

"Nothing that meant anything. Only gloating, I think. He said he was sorry for the disturbance." Giles hesitated. "What would you have done?"

"When?"

Irritated, he replied more sharply than he meant to. "When that hulking bastard was about to push you into the fire, when do you think?"

"I wouldn't turn to dust at the first lick of flame, you know." There was a pause. "I did have in mind a certain charm for the spontaneous ignition of gunpowder. And considering where he carried his pistol—" She added, "Devereux made his brother do it, you know."

Giles turned to look up at the dark loft, startled. "What?"

"Warrender's under a binding spell. You could see it in his eyes."

"Devereux is a sorcerer?" Giles frowned.

Her voice was lightly ironic. "Since he can do a binding spell, it's the logical conclusion."

"But why would he do that? Did he kill the potter?"

"Assuredly."

Giles gestured helplessly. "But why?"

She sounded exasperated. "I'm only an evil fay, ballad-maker, I don't have all the answers to all the questions in the world."

Giles drew a deep breath, summoning patience. Then he smiled faintly to himself. "My lady Kade, the playwright Thario always said that it was how we behave in a moment of impulse that told the true tale of our souls. And you, in your moment of impulse, kept a boy from being pushed into a fire. What do you say to that?"

An apple sailed upward out of the loft, reached the peak of its ascent, then dropped to graze his left ear. There was a faint scrabble and a brief glint of moonlight from above as a trap door opened somewhere in the roof. "My mother was the queen of air and darkness, Giles," her voice floated down as if from a great height. "And darkness..."

Giles rolled over, scratching sleepily at the fleas that had migrated from his straw-filled pallet. The stable had become uncomfortably warm and the summer night was humid. The sound of a woman sobbing softly woke him immediately. Wiping sweat from his forehead, he sat up and listened. It was coming from the stableyard, the side away from the inn.

He pushed to his feet and pulled his shirt on. Moonlight flickered down through the cracks in the high roof. As he crossed the hay-strewn floor, a horse stretched a long neck over a stall door and tried to bite him.

The sobbing was slightly louder. It seemed to blend with the

whisper of the breeze outside, forming an ethereal lament. Giles stopped, one hand on the latch of the narrow portal next to the large wagon door, some instinct making him wary.

Even through tears, the voice was silvery, bell-like. Odd. If the woman was under attack by whatever had killed the potter, she wouldn't be merely crying quietly.

On the chance that this was some private lover's quarrel and that interruptions, no matter how well meant, would be unwelcome, he groped for the rickety ladder in the darkness and climbed to the loft. The window shutters were open to the breeze and the big space was awash in moonlight. The hay-strewn boards creaked softly as Giles crossed it and crouched in front of the window.

A woman was pacing on the hard-packed earth in front of the stable, apparently alone. Her hair was colorless in the moonlight, and she wore a long shapeless robe of green embroidered with metallic threads. She swayed as the wind touched her, like a willow, like tall grass. Behind her the empty field stretched out and down toward the trees shadowing the dark expanse of the river.

The woman tilted her head back and the tears streamed down her face, into her hair. Giles had one leg out the window when Kade caught the collar of his shirt and jerked him back. He sat down hard and looked up to see her standing over him.

He shook his head, dizzy and a little ill, suddenly aware his mind had not been his own for a moment. His gut turning cold, he looked out at the weeping woman again, but this time saw her gliding progress as strange and unnatural. "What is it?" he whispered, prickles creeping up his spine.

Kade knelt in the window, matter-of-factly knotting her hair behind her head and tucking it into her kerchief. "A glaistig. Under that dress, it's more goat than human and it's overly fond of the taste of male blood. They usually frequent deep running water. Someone must have called her up from the river."

Giles looked down at the creature again, warily fascinated.

Kade said grimly, "Mark it well for your next ballad, that's your killer."

"Devereux controls it?" Giles guessed, thinking of the red ruin of the potter's house. "He made it kill the potter?"

"He must have. It wouldn't attack an old woman unless it was forced."

"But why send it here?"

Kade threw him an enigmatic look. "There's been too much happenstance already tonight. She's not trying to seduce a pack mule. She's after you."

"Me?" he said, startled, but Kade was already gone.

Kade closed her eyes and pulled glamour out of the night air and the dew, drawing it over herself. It was a hasty job, and it wouldn't have fooled anyone in daylight, but the creature below was not intelligent and the dark would lend its own magic.

She grabbed the tackle that hung from the loft and swung down, the heavy rope rough against her hands and bare feet.

The glaistig turned toward her, smiling and stretching out its arms. It would see a young man, in shirt and breeches, barefoot, details of feature and form hidden by the barn's shadow. Kade moved toward it, dragging her feet slightly, as if half-asleep. She was thinking through the rote words of a binding spell, to tie the glaistig to her and let her call it whenever she chose. The difficulty was that she had to touch the creature for the binding to take effect.

Within touching distance, the glaistig hesitated, staring at her. Its eyes threw back the moonlight like the glassy surface of a pool, but Kade could read confusion and suspicion there.

Before it could flee, Kade leapt forward and grabbed its hands. It shrieked in surprise, the shrill piercing cry turning into a growl. It tried to jerk free and only succeeded in dragging Kade across the dusty yard.

Kade stumbled, the gravel tearing into her feet. The glaistig was a head taller than she and heavier. She dug her heels in and gasped, "Just tell me why he sent you after my new favorite musician and we'll call this done."

"Let go!" Far gone in rage, the creature's voice was less alluringly female, but far more human.

Straining to stay on her feet, Kade hoped it didn't get the idea to slam her up against the barn or the stone wall of the innyard, but the creature seemed just as bad at advance planning as she was. "I'm giving my word. Tell me why he sent you and I'll let you go!"

The glamour had dissolved in the struggle, and the residue of it lay glittering on the earth like solid dewdrops. The glaistig

abruptly stopped struggling to peer at her, confused. "What are you?"

"I've power over all the fay and if you don't tell me what I want to know now I'll bind you to the bottom of the village well in a barrel with staves and lid of cold iron. Does that tell you who I am?" Kade snarled. She had no idea if that would tell the glaistig who she was or not. And with her spell trembling like sinew stretched to the breaking point she couldn't have bound a compass needle to true north.

The glaistig shivered. "He didn't tell me."

"Oh, come now, you can do better than that." Sweat was dripping into Kade's eyes.

"I don't know, I don't know," it wept, sounding like a human woman again. "I swear, he told me to come here after the music-maker, he didn't tell me why. Do you think he would tell me why? Let me go."

Kade released the spell in relief and the glaistig flung away from her. It stumbled, then fled towards the river in an awkward loping run. Kade sat down heavily on the dirt. She realized Giles was standing beside her, that he had been outside watching nearly the entire time.

He said, "You could have been killed."

She got to her feet, legs trembling with strain. "No, only nibbled on a little." She shook the dust out of her hair. "I can call that glaistig back whenever I want it. Though I'm not sure why I would. This all started out in a very promising way, but Devereux hasn't tried to fight me, or set me any puzzles to solve."

There was a moment of silence, then Giles said, "What do you mean?"

Something in his voice made Kade reluctant to answer. She watched the glaistig disappear among the trees near the river. Beautiful as it was, it was still just as empty-headed and perverse as the rest of the fay. It might guide a child out of the forest or care for elderly fishermen, but it would certainly kill any young man it could catch.

Giles asked, "Did he have any reason at all to kill the potter?"

"No." She could all but hear him drawing that last conclusion. If Giles Verney, balladeer, knew enough about Kade Carrion to realize that killing the village potter would bring her here, than surely the local sorcerer would realize it as well.

"The potter did nothing to him, knew nothing about him?"

Kade looked at him, his face a white mask in the moonlight. "What did you think this was?" she asked quietly.

"I didn't think it was a game. I didn't think he did it just to get your attention." He didn't sound shocked, only resigned.

With a snort of irony, Kade said, "It's what we do, Giles." She drew the fallen, scattered glamour around her to cloak herself in moonlight and shadow, and walked away.

Later in the night, when the moon was dimmed by clouds, Kade walked up the cart track to the gates of the Warrender manor house. The walls were crumbling like those around the village, too low to attract royal attention and be torn down. The house was small by city standards, but it was better than anything anyone else in Riversee had. It was two stories, with high, narrow windows shuttered against the darkness.

It had never mattered before what anyone else thought of her. The fay disliked each other as a matter of course, and Kade had never regarded her relatives on either side of the family with anything but anger or contempt. Having Giles' idealistic vision of her shattered shouldn't twist in her heart. But she hadn't chosen this game, Devereux had; she would find out what he wanted and end it tonight, one way or another.

Two servants were sleeping in a shabby outbuilding that housed the dovecote; she heard one cough and stir sleepily as she passed the door but neither wakened.

As she had hoped, there was a doorway near the back of the house, open and spilling lamplight. A postern door here would make a convenient exit for someone who wanted to leave or enter late at night without drawing attention.

The dry grass caught at her skirt as she stepped up to the open door. The room inside was low-ceilinged and cluttered with the debris of sorcery. Two long tables held heavy books, clouded glass vessels, curiously shaped and colored rocks or fragments of crystal. Wax had collected at the bases of the candles, their wan light revealing bare stone walls and soot-stained rafters. Fortune Devereux stood at the far end of the room, his back to her, leaning over an open book.

Kade held out a hand, took a slow breath, and tasted the aether carefully. There was nothing, no wards that would set off nasty spells if she touched the doorsill. She took the last step forward and leaned in the doorway saying, "Now what do you need this mess for?"

Devereux turned, his smile slow and triumphant. His doublet and shirt were open across his chest and she saw again that he was a very attractive man. "I didn't think you'd come."

She added that smile to what she knew of sorcerers and thought *so this room is warded*. She tested the aether again and felt the tug of the spell this time. *Damn*. She hadn't felt it outside because it wasn't set to stop her from entering the room; it was set to stop her from leaving. *Idiot. Overconfidence and impatience will kill you without any help from Devereux*. She didn't like stepping into his trap, but she still thought her power was more than equal to this mortal sorcerer's. If he struck at her directly, he would find that out. She smiled back, making it look easy. "I've only just gotten here and you're lying already."

His expression stiffened.

"You bound a glaistig and killed an old potter in the village you know by tradition I consider my property. Simply to get my attention. But you expected me not to take the bait and appear? Really, that makes you something of a fool, doesn't it?"

Devereux lifted a brow. "I misspoke. I didn't think you would come tonight, since you were occupied with your musician."

"I see." She nodded mock-complacently. "Jealousy, and we've only just met. Did it ever occur to you that all I had to do was point you out to the villagers, explain how you used the glaistig to kill the old potter, and this house would be burning down around your ears now?"

He laughed. "And I thought your loyalty to these people was as fickle as that of the rest of the fay. I didn't realize you were so virtuous."

Kade lifted a cool brow, though for some reason the jibe about loyalty had hit home. "My loyalty is fickle, but at least they gave me fruit and flowers. What did you ever do for me?"

"I have an offer for you." Devereux took a step forward. "You could benefit from an alliance with me."

"Benefit?" She rolled her eyes. "I repeat, what did you ever do for me?"

"It's what I can do for you. I can give you revenge."

This was new. No one had ever offered that before. Kade watched his calm face carefully, intrigued. "Revenge on whom?"

"The court, the king. The tricks you play on them, however deadly, aren't worthy of you. With my help, and the help of others that I know—"

"You want to use me against my royal relatives." Kade shook her head, disappointed, and added honestly, "It's an audacious plan, I'll willingly give you that much. No man's had the courage to suggest such a thing to me before."

His face had hardened and she knew it had been a long time since anyone had refused him anything. "But it is not to your taste, I take it."

Kade shrugged. "If I really wanted to kill my mortal brother I could have done it before now. What I want to do is make him and his mother suffer, and I don't think you or your supporters would agree to that. And as soon as I wasn't useful to you anymore, one of you would try to kill me, then I'd have to kill one or more of you, and the whole mess would fall apart." She hesitated, and for some reason, perhaps because he was so comely, said, "If you had approached me as a friend, it could have been different. Perhaps we could have worked something out to serve your end."

But from his angry expression he didn't recognize it as the offer it was, or he felt it was a lie or a trap. *Maybe it was*, Kade admitted to herself. Maybe what she really wanted was something else entirely, something Devereux simply hadn't the character to offer her.

"I suggest you reconsider," Devereux said, his voice harsh.

She said dryly, "I suggest you stick to sorcery and leave politics to those with the talent for it."

He stepped back, giving her a thin-lipped smile. "You can't leave. This room is warded with a curse. If you break the barrier, the creature that loves you most in the world will die."

Relieved, Kade laughed at him as she slipped out the door. Fay didn't love each other, and there was no mortal left from her childhood who didn't want to see her dead. He had chosen this spell badly. "Curse away. I've nothing to lose."

"I think you have!" Kade heard him call after her as she ran through the tall grass. As she came around the side of the house, there was a shout. Ahead in the darkness she saw moving figures

and the glow from the slow match of a musket. She swore and ducked.

The musket thundered and there was a sharp crack as the ball struck the stone wall behind her. *If they hit me with that thing*, Kade thought desperately, *we're all going to find out just how human I am*. The musket balls were cold iron, and her fay magic could do nothing to them.

But that protection didn't extend to the gunpowder inside the musket. She covered her head with her arms and muttered the spell she had considered using on Warrender in the inn.

There was an explosion and a scream as someone's wheellock pistol went off, then a dozen little popping sounds as the scattered grains of powder from the musket's blast ignited.

Kade scrambled to her feet. The grass near the gate had caught fire and she was forgotten in the face of that immediate threat. She ran to the back wall with its loose bricks and crumbling mortar and climbed it easily. At the top she paused and looked back. In the glow of the grass fire she could see Devereux walking back and forth, shouting at the servants in angry frustration. Revenge against her royal relatives would have been sweet. *But it would never have worked, not with him, anyway*, she thought with a grimace. *Too bad*.

It was barely dawn when she reached the inn, and through the windows she could see that candles had been lit in the common room. From just outside the door she thought there was more noise than seemed normal at this hour, especially after last night's drinking bout.

When she stepped inside, she heard a woman say, "Must have died in his sleep, poor thing."

The morning was well advanced when Kade waited for the glaistieg beneath a bent aging willow in a stretch of forest near the river.

It dropped a lock of golden hair into Kade's palm.

"Did he notice?" Kade asked, looking up at the creature.

The glaistieg's eyes were limpid, innocent. "I did it while he slept."

"Very good." She should have treated Devereux' curse with more

caution, she had said that to herself a hundred times over the rest of the long night. *And you should have known.* All those brave stories Giles had told of her, his audacity in coming here to find her, should have said it plainly enough. She had also said that she didn't care, but no amount of repetition could make a lie the truth. *Giles knew I was dangerous company to keep.* Yes, he knew, but he had kept it anyway. And that made it all the worse.

She added the hair to a small leather pouch prepared with apricot stones and the puss from a plague sore, then sat down on a fallen log to sew it up with the small neat stitches she had learned as a child.

"The sorcerer was lovely," the glaistieg said regretfully, watching her.

"He was lovely," Kade agreed. "And cunning, like me. And I would trade a hundred of both of us to know that one unlovely ballad-singer was still alive somewhere in the world."

Kade left Riversee after that. She had thought to stay to see the result of her handiwork, but she had discovered that knowing was enough.

Gray clouds were building for a storm, and she might have summoned one of the many flighted creatures of fayre and ridden the wind with it, but she had also discovered that she preferred to walk the dusty road. Some things had lost their pleasure.

end

Night at the Opera

*This story takes place before the novel **The Death of the Necromancer**, shortly before Nicholas met Madeline.*

Reynard Morane was at his usual table in the Cafe Baudy, a somewhat risqué establishment built on a barge in the Deval Forest pleasure garden's lake, when a beautiful man approached his table. This wasn't an unusual occurrence, especially in this cafe, but this beautiful man was a stranger. He said, "Captain Morane?"

From his features and dark skin, the man was Parscian, a little younger than Reynard but not by much, tall and well-built, and dressed in an elegant but understated way which suggested some level of the upper class. The coat was too expensive for the man to be from a university. For some reason, Reynard attracted a high percentage of men of academic persuasions. "Yes." Reynard smiled warmly. "Please join me."

The man hesitated, then drew out the opposite chair. "A friend told me about you."

"And which friend is this?" Reynard caught the waiter's attention and lifted his brows. The waiter sized up the situation professionally, then went to the bar for a fresh bottle of wine and glasses.

"A man named Biendare." The man lowered his voice. "I believe he is known in some circles as 'Binny.'"

"Binny?" Reynard frowned. This was not encouraging. Binny was not someone who would have recommended Reynard for an assignation. At least not the kind of assignation Reynard had hoped for. Just to make certain, he said, "At the roasted nut kiosk on the Street of Flowers?"

"No, it was in March Street, at a wine bar that also sells fried fish."

"Right." Reynard sat up, adjusting his attitude from invitingly indolent to business-like and alert.

The waiter arrived at the table with the bottle and glasses. Reynard sighed and told him, "No."

"No?" The waiter looked startled, then disappointed. "Oh. Coffee, perhaps?"

"Coffee," Reynard agreed.

The man cast a puzzled look at the retreating waiter's back, and Reynard admitted, "I was hoping it was an assignation." He waved a hand. "It's the Cafe Baudy, you know. There are often assignations."

"Oh, yes, I..." The man obviously decided to drop that subject and pursue his objective. "My name is Amadel. I am the confidential secretary for the Lady Shankir-Clare. She needs assistance of a...particular sort."

Reynard held up a hand for silence as the waiter approached. He waited until the coffee service had been arranged and the waiter departed, then said, "She's being troubled by someone but feels unable to confide the details to the Prefecture?"

"Yes, exactly." Amadel added cream to his cup with the relief of a man who had been searching everywhere for help and was finally in the right place.

This was odd. The Shankir-Clares were a family of rather famous diplomats, wealthy and well-respected in both Parscia and Ile-Rien, where the different branches of the family had originated. Reynard had never met any of them because they were the sort of people who were invited to the palace, not the sort who traveled in demi monde circles. No wonder Amadel hadn't been familiar with the Cafe Baudy. "How did you ever run across Binny?"

"Lady Shankir-Clare's hairdresser knew him," Amadel said. "She said he was the best way to contact people who could help with...sensitive problems."

"Is it blackmail?" Reynard asked. If one of the Shankir-Clare ladies had trusted her affections to the wrong man, and it wasn't someone associated with the infamous Count Montesq, Reynard could probably have it taken care of before dinner. "I quite like dealing with blackmailers. I have some experience at it."

"It isn't an ordinary blackmailer. It's a sorcerer." Amadel's brow furrowed as if he was trying to control a wince of anticipation. He thought Reynard would refuse the commission now. Most of the people who did this sort of thing wouldn't tangle with a sorcerer.

Reynard smiled. "Then Binny sent you to the right place." He

signaled the waiter to bring the bill.

An hour later, having exchanged cards with Amadel and made an appointment for a meeting at the Shankir-Clare townhouse, Reynard ran Nicholas down in the southern river docks, in a cafe that was normally used by shipping and warehouse workers.

Nicholas was in his disguise as Donatien, and so was dressed in the work clothing of a minor clerk. The disguise changed the shape of his mustache and short beard, and made him look distinctly older. He was not currently working on following anyone or spying on anyone or waiting to meet someone to spy or follow at some point in the future. Reynard knew this because Nicholas was reading a book in the binding of the lending library up on Crossriver Street, which did not mesh with his persona of Donatien, but wasn't out of bounds for the clerk costume he was currently wearing. Also, Cusard had directed him here and said Nicholas had just stepped out for coffee.

Reynard took a seat at the table and Nicholas frowned at him in affront, as if he had been joined by a stranger. Having worked with Nicholas for some time now, Reynard found nothing unusual in this. Nicholas maintained two major personas: Donatien, the criminal mastermind of Vienne, hunted by the Prefecture, and Nicholas Valiarde, art importer and gentleman of minor note. There were dozens of others, but Reynard didn't usually bother to sort them out. He said, "I have an appointment this afternoon." He placed Amadel's card on the table.

Nicholas hesitated, possibly shedding whatever persona he had found necessary to employ to sit here in the quiet cafe and read. He picked up the card and examined it front and back, then tucked it away in his coat. "I can't give you much time. I have to go to the theater tonight."

There was an actress that Nicholas had been watching. One would call it "courting" except for the fact that Nicholas had made no attempt to contact her or draw her attention to himself in any way. Reynard considered it a step in the right direction that Nicholas was admitting that he was looking at her. Whether he would at some point actually speak to her was anyone's guess. Reynard said, "From what I understand it's a sorcerer involved in

blackmail."

Nicholas lifted his brows. "Someone is blackmailing the Shankir-Clares? And is still alive? That's intriguing."

Reynard heard the undercurrent in those words, though he doubted anyone else would have detected it. Nicholas hated blackmailers, with a passion that made Reynard's feelings toward them pale. Count Montesg, the man who had caused Nicholas' foster father's death, made much of his living by blackmail. "Yes, for some reason they can't go to the magistrates or just have tea with the queen and ask her to tell the court sorcerer to go and crush the idiot," Reynard said. Criminal acts of sorcery toward the nobility fell under the court sorcerer's purview, and would be reported to him even if the Shankir-Clares took it to the Prefecture. "His name is Antoine Idilane. Have you heard of him?"

Nicholas concentrated for a moment, obviously consulting a mental file of names. "No. He's not known in my circles."

Criminal circles, Nicholas meant. That didn't mean Idilane wasn't a criminal, it just meant he wasn't one who Nicholas had ever encountered. "He's a student at Lodun."

Nicholas said, "If he's a student at Lodun, why is he in Vienne in the middle of term?"

"That's an interesting question," Reynard agreed. "He might be traveling back and forth; it's not that long by express train."

Nicholas frowned. "It's not very convenient. He might not be attending lectures. Or the university might have requested that he make himself scarce."

Reynard nodded. "Will you ask around for me this afternoon?"

"Of course." Nicholas eyed him. "If you find you need assistance, you know you can call on me."

"I was hoping you'd say that." Reynard smiled. "I'll even give you half the fee."

Nicholas gestured that away. "Unnecessary." Despite having spent his early life in great poverty, Nicholas was indifferent to money. He had enough for his purposes and greed was never his motivation for doing anything.

For Reynard, interfering with a blackmailer was payment enough. He had lost a young lover to suicide because of one, and the blame had been all his since Reynard had not taken better care to keep the young man's letters safe. Reynard had had many lovers, both before and after the incident. But since then he put a great

deal of effort into making sure none of them suffered from their association with him, no matter how brief. He also eliminated blackmailers, sometimes by frightening them off, sometimes by hiding what was left of the bodies. "People, especially people like the Shankir-Clares, like to pay for services rendered. It's difficult for them to understand that we do it for amusement."

Nicholas' expression was annoyed. "We don't do it for amusement."

"Keep telling yourself that," Reynard said, and took his leave.

Shankir-Clare House was on Ducal Court Street, a four-story edifice that still managed to look elegant and reserved despite the massive classical columns lining the pediment. When a footman opened the door, Reynard handed over his visiting card.

The servants must have been told to expect him because he was whisked into the large foyer and up the stairs, past the public second floor and up to the third, where the family would have their private rooms. The parlor he was taken to was occupied by Amadel, who looked as if he had been pacing the entire time, and two ladies, one of whom Reynard recognized immediately.

Lady Shankir-Clare was a lovely woman in her early 50s, with the dark skin and the hawkish features of the Parscian side of the family. She wore an elegant blue afternoon visiting gown, with a Parscian-style silk patterned scarf wrapped around her hair. The young girl who sat beside her on the lounge was not so elegant or so lovely, but then she didn't look as if she was old enough to be introduced into formal society. There was a suggestion of lanky knees and elbows under her perfectly acceptable gown, and she wore a pair of spectacles. They made her look bookish, but then she probably was bookish. Reynard thought she might be a young relative, brought to the city for a visit. Surely Lady Shankir-Clare would send her away before they got down to business.

Amadel said, "My lady, this is Captain Reynard Morane. Captain Morane, this is the Lady Shankir-Clare and her daughter, Miss Belina Shankir-Clare."

Reynard bowed. He would never have taken that young girl as the daughter of this elegant house. And if she was here, she had to be involved in the blackmail, if not the principal victim. It almost

shocked him; this girl was still a child, surely.

"Please sit down." Lady Shankir-Clare gestured to a chair.

"Amadel has told you a little of our problem."

Reynard took a seat, as did Amadel. Reynard said, "Yes, he said that you're having difficulty with a certain sorcerer."

"Yes." She glanced at Belina. "My daughter has fallen victim to a..." Her jaw tightened and she clearly considered and discarded several terms. "A predator." Belina looked glum.

Reynard nodded. "I also know that you feel you can't go to the Prefecture or the palace for help. I was curious as to why. This seems like something that could be put before the court sorcerer."

"It seems like it." Lady Shankir-Clare's voice was dry. "But we would prefer to keep it away from the court."

"Tell him," Belina said, flatly. "If you're asking him to help, then you have to trust him."

Reynard decided he liked Belina a good deal. He waited, and after a moment, Lady Shankir-Clare said, "The court sorcerer is not our friend."

"I've heard he isn't a friendly man, in general." Reynard had heard he was a right bastard, actually.

Lady Shankir-Clare explained reluctantly, "Members of my family have doubted his loyalty to the queen and suggested to her that she might replace him. Word of this was carried to him."

"Ah." Yes, that meshed with the rumors circulating among the demi monde. "And you don't trust him to deal with your daughter's situation with the delicacy it requires."

"I'm not in a delicate situation," Belina said, with some heat. "I may be a fool, but I didn't sleep with him."

Her mother glared. Reynard assured Belina, "I was using 'delicate' as a metaphor, not a euphemism." But it was refreshing to deal with someone who spoke plainly. He had thought it would take another half hour before Lady Shankir-Clare got around to admitting what the problem was. Belina seemed sensible, and he had trouble imagining how she could have ended up in this situation, unless someone had set a deliberate trap for her. "What exactly did he do to you? Or you to him?"

"He propositioned me, at a ball. I laughed at him." Belina grimaced in a very unlady-like fashion. "I didn't mean to be cruel. I was nervous and it startled me. No one ever did that before!" Resigned, she gestured helplessly. "I apologized, but it didn't do

any good." She leaned forward. "Is that normal for men?"

"Sadly, yes," Reynard told her.

"But the worst is—" Belina glanced at her mother. "He has images. I didn't pose for them. I don't know how he got them."

"Disgusting images." Lady Shankir-Clare's grip tightened on her fan until it cracked.

"Photographs?" *Oh, hell*, Reynard thought. That was going to be tricky.

"Yes." Belina's composure didn't slip, but he could tell it was taking her a great effort. "Of me. With no clothes. Only it isn't my body. He said he made them with magic, that there's no way to prove they aren't real. I mean, I can tell it isn't my body, and my maid can tell, and my sisters, but—"

"I understand." Reynard stopped her. Amadel was obviously trying not to writhe with embarrassment and looked on the verge of jumping up and leaving the room. Lady Shankir-Clare was gritting her teeth. "The photographs are fake, but you have no way to prove that." It could be done by the relatively simple method of cutting apart two different images, combining the pieces, and then taking another photograph. One could penetrate the deception by a close examination with a magnifying glass. But Nicholas had shown him images that had been magically manipulated, and they were much harder to prove false. The method didn't matter; the humiliation and distress the images would create if displayed publicly were very real. Bad enough for it to happen to anyone with a reputation to risk, but that it should happen to a sheltered child was just that much worse. *I'll just have to kill him*, Reynard thought. *Well, I was probably going to do that anyway.* The problem would be in getting the photographs away from the bastard so they couldn't fall into any worse hands.

He kept his expression mild. "Did he know who you were? A Shankir-Clare?"

Belina frowned. Reynard felt the implications of the question hadn't eluded her. She said, slowly, "He called me by name, but I had never met him before. Someone told me who he was later."

Just to make it plain, Reynard said, "Somehow he knew he could insult you without consequences?"

Lady Shankir-Clare's expression turned thoughtful, then even more angry. Belina appeared to be biting back a curse. Lady Shankir-Clare said, "So he knew about our quarrel with the court

sorcerer."

"Or someone else put him up to it." Reynard glanced at Belina. "He's asked for a meeting? The photographs in exchange for money?"

She nodded grimly. "Two nights from now, at the opera."

It was always dangerous to deal with a criminal sorcerer, especially one who asked for private meetings. The opera was warded, but only for the general protection of the building. Unless the man intended to use magic to blow it up or set it on fire, the wards wouldn't interfere. "I can't escort you—my reputation would draw stares, and we don't want to be noticed." The opera drew as many noble and upper-class patrons as it did demi monde and every other class who could afford the tickets. Too many people might recognize Belina and wonder why she was with Captain Reynard Morane. There was just no story to explain why the Shankir-Clares would ask him to escort their daughter to the opera, even if there had been some family connection. "I'll be there, nearby, and I have a friend—a suitable, unobjectionable friend—to escort you."

"You can protect her?" Lady Shankir-Clares voice was tight.

Reynard stood. "My lady, no one will touch her. And this man will not trouble you again."

Lady Shankir-Clares smiled grimly. Then Belina ruined it by demanding, "Are you going to kill him?"

Amadel winced. Lady Shankir-Clares said, forbiddingly, "Belina."

Reynard found it more politic to withdraw than answer. He bowed, and followed Amadel out.

On the afternoon of the next day, Reynard stood on the landing of Idilane's flat, while Nicholas worked the lock. The building was on a relatively quiet street with flats too small for families, and so inhabited mostly by young office workers who were absent during the day. Nicholas had discovered that Idilane did indeed travel between Vienne and Lodun on the express, and wouldn't return until tomorrow morning. With the concierge currently out doing her shopping, they shouldn't be disturbed.

"Will your sorcerer friend be of any use?" Reynard asked.

Nicholas, still occupied by the lock, winced. "He's not well right now." The tumblers clicked and Nicholas stood and turned the

handle.

Reynard didn't move. It was never a good idea to shove one's way into a sorcerer's domain, even a student sorcerer. But Nicholas stepped inside, explaining, "The flats have a general cleaning woman. He can't have warded the place."

"Then let's get started." The flat held only one room, but it was large enough for a bed, a desk, dresser, and comfortable seating area.

After some time, Reynard stood in the middle of the room, dissatisfied. He had mainly been hoping to find the photographs, which would simplify any decisions about their next course of action, but they weren't here. The search had been exhaustive, including Nicholas using various devices to uncover sorcerous hiding places.

"He's got them on him," Nicholas said finally, circling the room like a prowling cat. "I didn't think he would be that clever."

"Something's wrong," Reynard said. Nicholas lifted his brows, and Reynard sighed. "I don't know what it is, I just have an odd feeling." He looked around again. "Bit of a stage set, do you think?"

"No, I'm certain he lives here." But Nicholas paced the room, frowning. He moved to the desk again. "The books, the notes he's taken, I'm certain he's a student of sorcery from Lodun. There are things here no one would know to fake." Nicholas spoke from experience, having attended Lodun himself, and closely associating with the sorcery students.

Reynard had to admit the disheveled appearance of the furnishings certainly seemed authentic. Then that elusive sense of wrongness solidified. He said, "There are no love letters, no dirty postcards, no prophylactics, none of that sort of thing. Not even a salacious novel." There were other letters, from other students, from distant relatives, from tailors and so forth. But nothing from a woman, not even a cousin or aunt. And none of the letters from male students indicated any romantic or erotic relationship.

Nicholas didn't appear to find this particularly enlightening. "I never had that sort of thing as a student."

"Of course you didn't. But this young man, as far as we can tell, is a slimy little ass. So why doesn't he have any of the things even nice young men have? From his behavior toward our employer, you'd think he would have left a trail of betrayed young women in

his wake. Is Miss Shankir-Clare the first he's accosted? That seems unlikely."

"I think *The Lady's Letters* is salacious." Nicholas poked through the drawers, looking for hidden compartments again.

Reynard turned to the bookshelves. "Does he have a copy? I didn't see it."

"No, I had a copy." Nicholas straightened up. "I see what you mean. If we didn't already have an account of his character, I would think we were looking at the room of a young monk. Someone could posit that his behavior was an aberration, the act of a spoiled silly young man thwarted for the first time in his short life, except—"

"For the photographs, and the criminal demand for money," Reynard finished. "And the knowledge that her highly-placed family will not be able to go to the court sorcerer for help."

"Yes." Nicholas made another circuit of the room. "Perhaps he has so many letters from discarded lovers he keeps them somewhere else."

"The meeting is tomorrow. There's no time to uncover any other hiding places."

Nicolas smiled. "Then it seems we're all going to the opera."

Reynard called for Belina two days later at half past seven, which would have her arriving at the opera far earlier in the evening than he ever had before. The demi monde didn't usually roll in until close to the interval, but people of Belina's set would arrive well in time for the beginning of the performance.

The coach he had brought was unmarked, though the driver was well known to Reynard and would be happy to step in if anyone needed to be beaten unconscious. Reynard separated Belina from her mother, Amadel, and an anxious maid, escorted her outside, and handed her into the coach.

Once they were settled and clapping down the street, he explained, "My friend will join us on the way. If anyone asks, tell them he's been commissioned by your family to acquire a painting, and he's escorting you tonight as a favor to them." Reynard took in her lack of expression, and somewhat tight grip on her reticule. Her gown was a wine-colored silk, and looked lovely on her, though

the lack of décolletage suggested it had been chosen by her mother or a sensible maid. "He isn't going to proposition you."

The set of Belina's shoulders relaxed a little. She asked, a little mulish and a little plaintive, "Why not?"

"You're too young for him, for one thing. For the other..." Reynard tried to think of a succinct way to explain Nicholas and gave up. "He just isn't going to proposition you."

Belina nodded understanding. "He doesn't like women?"

"He doesn't like anyone."

"Why are you helping us? Helping me. Amadel said he had the impression you really didn't care about the money, or if you were paid or not."

Amadel was perceptive. It was really too bad he wasn't interested in an assignation. Reynard explained, "A friend of mine was targeted by a blackmailer. It didn't end well for him. Reducing the number of blackmailers in the city provides me with some comfort."

Belina leaned forward. "So you are going to kill him."

"Belina." Reynard regarded her patiently. "In the circle in which you are traveling tonight, we don't ask that sort of question."

She thumped back against the seat. "But what if it was my fault? What if I caused him to do this—"

"To make sorcerously-created obscene photographs? He didn't come up with that because he was so stricken by the awkward rebuff of, forgive me, a schoolgirl who then apologized for her actions. He's done this before." Even if it was the first time, even if there was no plan or ulterior motive, a sorcerer who would do this was plainly a menace. It was Idilane's misfortune that he had chosen the wrong victim.

Belina still frowned, but clearly decided to table the argument for another time.

Ten blocks from the opera, as the coach paused to wait for a cabriolet to clear the way, the door opened. Nicholas swung inside and dropped into the seat opposite Belina. He was dressed impeccably for the opera, in a dark suit with a light-colored waistcoat, and a hat and cane.

Reynard said hastily, "Miss Belina Shankir-Clare, this is Nicholas

Valiarde."

Nicholas frowned. "How old are you? Should you even be out without a chaperone?"

Belina shared a glance with Reynard, her expression eloquent. "I think I've got a chaperone," she muttered.

Reynard asked Nicholas, "Do you have it?"

Nicholas produced a glass ball, small enough to fit into the palm of his hand. "Of course."

Belina leaned forward. "What is it?"

Reynard told Belina, "It's a spell that will distract and confuse a sorcerer for a few moments, and prevent him from using his powers." It wouldn't trouble any serious practitioner, but from what Nicholas had said, the things were designed to work on Lodun sorcery students and used by them to bedevil each other at parties. It would provide an instant of distraction at the right moment, which was all they might need.

Nicholas lifted the shade over the window to check the street. "It's clear."

Reynard just hoped Arisilde Damal had been relatively sober when he had provided it. He shifted over and put a hand on the doorlatch. "I'll see you later, Miss Shankir-Clare."

Belina nodded anxiously, and Reynard swung the door open and stepped out onto the walk. The coach clattered away, and Reynard adjusted his coat, and started to walk toward the theater district.

Reynard arrived just at twilight, taking up a position across the street where he had a good view of the the opera's grand main entrance. Classical statues were carved into the façade and gilded figures danced above the pediment, and the fountains with ornamental lamps that stood in front of the building provided a shadow-show of moving light and water. The area was already noisy with early arrivals and the flower and sweet sellers and drink vendors were setting up along the opposite promenade. Reynard strolled over to one and ordered a coffee.

Coaches arrived sporadically and deposited minor nobility or wealthy patrons, dressed in their formal fashionable best. A number of people of the less fashionable sets were walking in, it being easier to have a cabriolet drop you off at the corner than fight

its way into the line of personal coaches. Though it wasn't quite as crowded as usual tonight. Reynard attributed that to the fact that the performance was the old standby *Life of the Good Duke*, put on to keep the company warm and up to scratch before the real opening of the season next month. Nicholas had pointed out that it made an excellent cover, since it was an opera that people often took young relatives to, because they were the only ones who weren't sick to death of it. It was just not the sort of opera that the Gamethon Club attended to be rowdy at.

Not long later, the coach pulled into the carriage circle, and Nicholas stepped down and handed Belina out. As the coach drove away, Reynard watched carefully, but saw no one give them a second glance. Well, one woman, but Reynard suspected she was only admiring Belina's dress. Belina herself was trying to look at ease while stealing glances at the other arriving patrons. Reynard waited until they were through the front doors, then handed his cup back to the coffee-vendor, crossed the street and made his own way in.

The big double doors opened into a three-story pillared gallery, lit by crystal and gilt gas lamps and lined with different colors of marble, all the way up to the paintings covering the arched ceiling. The subjects were all classical, sex, death, and warfare, very appropriate to the usual preoccupations of opera. He navigated through the crowd and across the marble-floored entryway and went up the right side of the staircase. He didn't note any acquaintance, which was fortunate. More new arrivals were milling around the grand foyer on the second floor.

After a moment, he spotted Nicholas and Belina. Nicholas had secured a glass of soda negus for Belina and was radiating "friend of the family escorting young lady in an entirely paternal manner." Then a young man in cavalry officer's uniform approached Belina. Reynard saw her shoulders stiffen and her chin lift and knew this was no friendly acquaintance. He strolled close enough to listen, pretending to be waiting in the outer circle of Lady Villechasse's admirers.

The young man was saying, "This isn't a palace ball, my dear, we don't need to be acquainted to speak."

Belina said, "Sir, I don't know you, and you need to leave me alone." Her voice was quaking with what Reynard read as a combination of nerves and rage.

"Of course you'd have to say that here. I'll join you in your box, shall I—" It wasn't a question.

Sounding a little bored, Nicholas said, "Leave, and do not attempt to speak to her again."

"And who are you?" The young man eyed Nicholas with contempt. "Too old to be a suitor, I think. If her family has hired you to escort her—"

"I won't tell you again." Nicholas didn't move but his weight shifted.

The young man was stubborn. "You're unarmed."

Reynard rolled his eyes. If this young idiot challenged Nicholas to a duel, he wasn't going to be able to keep his countenance.

Nicholas's smile implied physical violence would be a terrible mistake. He said, "Draw your sword and find out."

The young man hesitated a long moment, became flustered under Nicholas' steady regard, then withdrew. Reynard tracked his progress across the crowd, but he didn't appear to be signaling anyone, or going to make a report. Still, it was an odd incident. He glanced idly back at Nicholas and Belina.

Belina caught his eye briefly but didn't make the mistake of acknowledging him. She sipped her drink and said, "You can't kill someone in the grand foyer of the opera and get away with it."

Nicholas raised a brow. "If it comforts you to believe that."

"How would you—" Belina frowned. "Do you have poison darts?"

Nicholas' failure to answer was pointed. "Why did that creature think he could approach you that way?"

Belina bit her lip, controlled herself, and said, "I think Idilane's spread rumors. Well, I know he has. My friends have told me."

"Mmm," Nicholas commented, and flicked a glance at Reynard.

Yes, Reynard thought, *this little bastard has a great deal to answer for.*

"You should have told us earlier," Nicholas told Belina, offering her his arm for the obligatory stroll around the grand foyer. "I would have brought more poison darts."

After Nicholas and Belina had started for the stairs to the boxes, Reynard strolled around the crowd for a while, but couldn't spot

anyone who matched the description of Idilane. The man could be magically disguising his appearance; the opera's wards wouldn't interfere with such a mild spell. He spotted one acquaintance, a young man called Dissonet who was the despair of his family and proving it by already being drunk before the performance had even started. Few people attended the opera unaccompanied, so Reynard contrived to run into him. Dissonet greeted him with somewhat bleary delight. "Morane! What are you doing here?"

"I was meeting someone for an assignation, but he didn't show," Reynard made his tone mildly regretful. "And you?"

"I forgot it was *Life of the Good Duke* tonight," Dissonet said sadly. He wavered and Reynard took his arm to steady him.

"Yes, it's unfortunate," Reynard said, "Come along, let's find your seat."

Before the first interval, Reynard left Dissonet snoring in his box and made his way around to the Shankir-Clare box. He listened through the door long enough to hear Nicholas and Belina having a spirited conversation about the merits of *Voyagers of the Fire Islands* which was playing at the High Follies. Belina had of course not been allowed to go to the scandalous production but had read her maid's copy of the playbook. Reynard slipped inside.

He crouched just inside the doorway, having an expert knowledge of just where one could stand or sit in an opera box and still not be visible from the floor or the other boxes. Though Nicholas and Belina had evidently done such a good job of being boring and conventional that he doubted anyone was watching. He had been waiting quite a while to air his principal grievance and now whispered, "I can't believe this bastard forced us to sit through the first two hours of *Life of the Good Duke*."

"It's insupportable," Nicholas agreed.

"Why does everyone think it's a comic opera?" Belina said. "It's not funny."

"It's apparently hilarious for individuals who have no sense of humor—" Nicholas began.

Reynard had kept one hand on the floor, and felt the telltale vibration of someone approaching the box. "Someone's coming." He stood and slipped behind the curtain.

Nicholas twisted to face the doorway. Belina knotted her hands together, then deliberately forced them apart.

The polite knock was unexpected. Nicholas told Belina, low-voiced, "It'll be a steward." Louder, he said, "Come in."

It was a steward, a young boy in the opera's black and white livery. He said, "A note for Miss Shankir-Clare," and held out a folded piece of stationery on a silver tray.

Nicholas stood, took the note, and tipped the boy. The boy bowed his way out of the box, and Reynard toed the door shut behind him. Reynard said, "There's no spell on that?" Some sorcerers could attach spells to objects, which would then attach to the person who received them. Though it was supposedly difficult to attach anything but a mild charm to paper.

Nicholas shook his head. "The note trays are solid silver, and warded. The opera takes precautions. They don't want idiots trying to send love charms." He handed the note to Belina and checked his pocket watch. "We're to meet him twenty minutes after the beginning of the fourth act, in the west underpassage."

Reynard checked his own watch. They had a good two hours to go. "I haven't been down there. It doesn't sound salubrious."

"It leads to the archives, where all the old sheet music and so forth is stored. Probably years' worth of attendance tallies and accounts as well. There's no reason for anyone to visit it during a performance, so the corridor will be empty." Nicholas looked down at Belina. "Will you go?"

Belina folded the note and handed it back to Nicholas. "I said I'd do whatever it takes to make him leave me alone." She lifted her chin. "I haven't changed my mind."

"Good." Nicholas exchanged a look with Reynard. "Now we know where his trap is."

Reynard smiled. "So it's time to set ours."

Reynard used the confusion of the next interval to slip out and make his way down to the west wing.

As Nicholas had explained, "It's called the west underpassage because it runs under the west side wing of the stage. There are a number of trap doors in that section for dramatic appearances and disappearances. They aren't used now except during the more

elaborate midwinter shows. The trap doors lead to the mechanical areas under the stage, the way the ones on the main stage do, but there is also provision made to allow chorus members to exit below that level, so they can use the underpassage to go back toward the audience end of the building and up to the dressing areas on the level above—"

Reynard had cut to the point. "So there are trap doors from the space below the stage down into that corridor."

"How do you know that?" Belina asked. "More importantly, why do you know that?"

"Because one day I might have to catch a blackmailer in the opera," Nicholas had told her.

Reynard took the precaution of buying a small posy of violets from the flower-seller in the grand foyer and then made his way down and into the dressing areas on the main stage level. There was a guard at the door, but Reynard tipped him and was allowed in without comment; he was a familiar figure here and knew he was considered a "safe" regular: one of the many people who might come backstage during the performance to meet a lover or just to visit with friends in the cast.

Reynard wandered down the dim hall of whitewashed plaster, *Life of the Good Duke* thundering away overhead, to the rooms where the chorus waited to go on. He chatted for a while with the bored young men cooling their heels until it was time to go up and sing through the fourth act. Finally he moved on, handed his bouquet to the older woman who helped with the costume changes, and then turned left and took a narrow set of stairs down, deeper into the space under the stage.

Here it was nearly dark and smelled strongly of sawdust and the paints used on the scenery and backdrops. *Life of the Good Duke* had no trapdoor entrances or exits, and all the stagehands were up in the flyover. He located the set of trapdoors in the unused west wing, finding his way from the light that came down through the gaps between the floorboards. He quickly located a trapdoor in the understage floor by its outline and the folding steps that could be dropped down to allow chorus members to climb down into the west underpassage. He lifted the door just enough to be able to see down without letting the stairs drop. Below was a corridor, lit by a few wall sconces. Carpets lined the marble floor and the walls were covered with anaglypta paper, but it was clearly not meant for as

much public use as the foyers and stairwells.

Reynard closed the trapdoor again and explored this part of the understage further, finding two more trapdoors with drop stairs, spaced out along the length of the west wing. The one in the middle seemed the best point to watch from. He dropped the stairs and they creaked and swayed and bent under his weight as he went down for a brief exploration. He made certain that there were no cross passages past this point, and that the far end of the corridor ended in the securely locked door of the archives. Then he took the fold of paper out of his pocket and began to sprinkle the contents on the carpet. It was a combination of salt, various powders, and silver dust, given to Nicholas by his sorcerer friend, and meant to reveal illusions and temporarily dispel wards.

When Reynard finished, he returned to the folding stairs and creaked his way up. As he reached the top and started to climb up into the understage, a figure loomed before him suddenly. He jerked back and swore, then realized he was looking at a support post framed by the dim light leaking through the boards overhead. *Idiot*, he told himself, and climbed the rest of the way up. He propped the trapdoor open a careful inch and settled in to wait.

It seemed an interminable time later when the fourth act finally rumbled into its opening salvos. Not long after that, Reynard saw Nicholas and Belina make their way down the corridor, Nicholas a pace or so in front. Then Nicholas stopped abruptly.

What? Reynard twisted to see the far end of the corridor. A figure stood there.

It was a tall, gaunt man, dark-haired and pale, dressed in dark evening clothes a few years out of date. It was hard to tell his age. The skeletal leanness of his body suggested age, but Reynard couldn't see any lines on his face.

This could be a problem. Reynard was certain no one had walked past, and he thought he would have heard the heavy door to the archives open if someone had come out that way.

"Is that him?" Nicholas' voice was quiet.

"No," Belina whispered. "I don't know who that is."

The man moved forward, and circled around one of the spots Reynard had sprinkled with silver dust.

Reynard felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up. They had thought Idilane an unsophisticated amateur blackmailer. He had certainly behaved like one. This seemed neither unsophisticated nor amateur.

Nicholas raised his voice a little. "What do you want?"

The man said, "I am sent by Master Idilane."

"Then we're in the right place. I was afraid we had stumbled into the wrong assignation." Nicholas made a slight gesture behind his back, telling Belina to stay where she was. Then he stepped forward. "What are you?"

"He wants the payment."

Nicholas stepped forward again. Belina didn't move, watching with frowning anxiety. Nicholas said, "Are you capable of answering questions? Or has he enslaved you with magic? If you're here against your will, we can help you."

Reynard thought he detected a minute hesitation before the response, "He wants the payment."

Nicholas was silent a moment, studying the man—creature—whatever it was. "We will need some guarantees, of course. Did he trap you?"

Something brushed past Reynard's legs and he jerked away, barely suppressing a curse. He twisted around and found himself staring at a young woman. His first thought was that she was a member of the chorus, and he started to whisper, "Ah, you must be wondering what we're—" And then realized he could see light through her.

Below, the creature repeated, "Guarantees," as if it had no notion what the word meant. As if Idilane had given it no instructions beyond obtaining the money.

Reynard stared. It was an apparition, obviously. The faded red gown he had taken for a costume was wispy and insubstantial, but he could see tears and stains. The girl was young, Belina's age, and her hair had once been carefully arranged but now hung disheveled and ragged. *Not a prostitute*, Reynard thought, noticing the cameo brooch and the lack of décolletage. Not a chorus member or an actress but not a young noble lady, either. A girl of some respectable circumstances, if not wealth, dressed up for the opera. He whispered, "What happened?"

Below, Nicholas was stalling, explaining the etymology of the word "guarantees." The girl moved around the trapdoor, silently,

stirring no dust. From this angle there was better light and Reynard saw her hollow eyes, sunken cheeks, and darkly bruised throat. Her expression was anxious, her gaze fixed on him as if willing him to understand. Apparitions didn't appear at random, for no reason. If she was appearing now, it was because some event had triggered it. Reynard was betting it wasn't the millionth pat performance of *Life of the Good Duke*.

The creature below said, "The girl will deliver the payment." Reynard turned back to the trap door and said, "Nic, it's not blackmail, it's murder!"

The apparition's expression transformed into fierce joy, and then she winked out of existence. Reynard threw himself down through the trap door.

The creature surged forward and Nicholas slapped its face. It jerked back, staggering, and red fire blossomed from its cheek. "It's a fay," Nicholas reported, clinically. He must have had an iron needle in his hand. Yes, Reynard had known he hadn't been joking about the poison darts.

Reynard swung off the drop stairs and landed on the floor. He drew his dress sword. The fay fell back a few steps. It grew taller, its skin turning a scaly gray, white clumps of hair sprouting from a head that was suddenly bulbous and distorted. This thing couldn't be here; fay of this size had been dying out in Ile-Rien for generations, driven away by the railroads. They were seen in rural areas occasionally, but never in the city. Idilane must be far stronger than he seemed to have control over this thing. Reynard said, "I think Idilane's done this before, but took the money and killed the victim."

"And how did you form this theory?" Nicholas stepped sideways, bracketing the creature. It darted at Reynard, then at Nicholas, testing them.

Reynard didn't move, refusing to be tested. "Because her ghost just appeared to me in the understage."

"Not conclusive, but one must admit the circumstantial evidence is compelling," Nicholas admitted.

Behind them, an admirably calm Belina said, "Should I throw the glass ball?"

"No," Nicholas told her. "It will only work on human sorcerers."

"Then should I go for help?" The creature had fixed its yellow gaze on her. She was clearly its real target.

"There won't be time." Reynard stepped closer. Fay couldn't touch iron or steel without great pain. The fact that this creature hadn't fled from his sword meant it had something up its sleeve. But Reynard doubted those darts were the only weapon Nicholas had on him, and all he needed to do was distract the creature long enough.

Its head tilted toward Reynard, the pale eyes empty of emotion. Then it flicked a long wooden club out of its coat and lunged for him. Reynard ducked the first blow and smashed his hilt into the creature's hand. He was reluctant to engage with his blade; he suspected the club had been designed to break human-forged swords. The creature fell back and he slashed it across the chest. It snarled and lurched toward him, just as Nicholas leapt on it from behind and whipped a chain around its throat.

It clawed at the links burning into its skin, and Reynard stabbed it in the chest. The creature tore away, sending Nicholas staggering, but then collapsed onto the carpet.

Reynard stepped forward, then cautiously kicked it over onto its back. It lay there, gasping, the gray color leaching out of its skin. Its whole body seemed to be shrinking, turning in on itself.

Nicholas crouched over it. "We can kill you or free you. Did Idilane send you to kill Belina Shankir-Clare?"

It choked and managed, "Yes. Do not ask me why, I don't know. He kills human women who displease him."

"He has you under his control? With spells?"

"I was given to him as a familiar, as payment by a more powerful sorcerer."

Belina, who had edged forward to stand by Reynard's elbow, demanded, "As payment for what? More blackmail? Who was the sorcerer?"

The fay said, "I only know it was payment."

"It was probably blackmail." Nicholas nodded to himself. "If we could find out who..."

"How many women?" Reynard said. He had the terrible feeling that Idilane was not new to this game, that the apparition above hadn't been the first, either.

The fay said, "Seven."

Reynard swore. Belina made a noise of dismay.

Ever practical, Nicholas asked, "What do you do with the bodies?"

It bared its teeth. "I eat them."

"Shit," Belina muttered.

"Always at the opera?" Nicholas asked.

"No, other places as well as here."

"How does—"

"Nicholas," Reynard interrupted. For someone as obsessed as he was, Nicholas could be easily sidetracked. "You're not writing a monograph on it, do we really need to know?"

"Very well." Nicholas asked the fay, "How do we free you?"

It said, "You cannot free me, his spells are woven through the substance of my body. I beg you to kill me."

Nicholas frowned, then looked up at Reynard. Reynard said, "I don't have a problem with that," and stabbed the creature in the heart.

Its body collapsed in on itself, and turned to dust, leaving only the clothing and club behind. Nicholas whipped a small bag and a brush out of his pocket, and began to sweep up the dust.

Belina stared. "Does this happen a lot? To you, I mean?"

"Off and on," Reynard admitted.

Nicholas tucked the bag of dust away, stood, and took Belina's arm. "Let's go to the restaurant and talk this over. I think after that we deserve to miss the fifth and sixth acts of *Life of the Good Duke*."

"At the very least," Reynard agreed, taking out his handkerchief to wipe his sword.

The restaurant was in a pavilion built on the east side of the opera, and was more than half empty. Reynard was a friend of the host and so was able to secure a booth that was isolated enough for a private conversation but still in full view of the few other diners and the waiters, for propriety's sake. There they ordered wine and a cream and berry tart for Belina.

Once they were served and the waiter withdrawn, Reynard told Belina, "There's a decision to be made."

Her brows drawn down in serious thought, she ate a couple of forkfuls of the tart. "About the photographs. And whether to tell the magistrates."

"Obviously—" Nicholas began.

Reynard cleared his throat and gazed significantly at him. He

knew more than he cared to about being pilloried by the opinions of both acquaintances and strangers. If Belina wanted to take that risk, it was a choice she should make herself.

Nicholas sighed and poured another glass of wine.

Belina stirred the cream on her tart. "If he has the photographs with him, we can take them."

"He may have other copies," Reynard said. He wanted to make certain she saw every aspect of the situation. "He won't have the chance to make more, if the magistrates take him, but we found nothing in his flat and can make no guarantees."

"But if we don't turn him in, no one will learn what happened to those other girls. If the magistrates take him and the story is in the penny sheets, the missing girls' families will realize what happened and come forward and perhaps there's even more evidence against him." She looked up, worried. "But how will we prove that he was using a fay to...get rid of the bodies?"

Nicholas smiled. "That's why I took the dust."

Belina narrowed her eyes at him. "You already have a plan, don't you."

Reynard sighed. "He always has a plan. That's why we have him."

Belina considered a moment more, then nodded firmly. "Let's get Idilane."

When the opera was nearly over and the restaurant would shortly be flooded with weary patrons, they took up their posts in a private room. Belina was seated at the room's dining table, with Reynard and Nicholas behind the curtains on the balcony, which looked out on the promenade that led around the side of the building back to the carriage circle in front. A steward was sent to summon Idilane from the box he was sharing with a Captain Benre and companions, who were presumably meant to be Idilane's alibi.

Belina waited, tapping her fingers impatiently against the table, more angry than nervous. Reynard approved. Her mother would undoubtedly not be happy about a public trial, but it would have to be done. Belina was both young and noble enough to be treated gently by the magistrates with regard to her testimony. If enough evidence was assembled from other sources, she might not have to

appear in court.

Nicholas twitched his curtain aside to whisper, "Remember to let him get close, but not too close."

"I know," Belina said, annoyed. "You've told me three times already."

"She knows, Nic." Reynard reached around and pulled Nicholas' curtain back into place.

A few moments later, the door opened and Idilane stepped in.

Idilane was what Reynard would have considered a fairly unassuming specimen. He was of middling height with dark hair, and features that were unobjectionable. It was obvious he could look affable and probably used that quality with the unwary. He would have little difficulty blending into crowds, being unmemorable. He did not look pleased to see Belina. The message from her would have alerted him that she had failed to fall into the trap, and he must have been considering the situation the entire time.

He opened his mouth to speak and Belina seized the moment. "Surprised to see me?" she said dryly.

Idilane rallied, obviously assuming Belina had never encountered his familiar. "Yes, I wondered why you didn't meet me as arranged—"

"I did go to your meeting. But you weren't there."

Idilane hesitated. "You're lying."

"Because if I went, I'd be dead?" Belina's gaze was direct. "Tell me, why do you do it? What benefit do you get? Do you do something disgusting with the dead bodies before your familiar eats them? We can discuss it, before the magistrates arrive."

Reynard controlled the urge to sigh, Nicholas rolled his eyes. Yes, Belina was off the script. They had felt there was no point in ascertaining Idilane's motives, as the magistrates would take care of that, but Belina obviously felt differently. The girl did have a passion for asking questions, Reynard thought.

Idilane's face worked. Then he smiled in a predatory fashion and took a step closer, almost within arm's reach of Belina. "You wouldn't call a magistrate. You can't risk them hearing about your exploits."

Belina was unmoved. "I don't have any exploits. And the magistrates and the penny sheets will be too distracted by all your murders to listen to your lies."

Idilane leaned closer and lifted a hand. Reynard thought he meant to touch Belina's face, but spell light flickered from his fingers. He said, "You're very confident. But I don't believe you've already summoned the magistrates."

Belina lifted her chin. "I'm not alone."

Idilane sneered. "Then what are your companions waiting for?"

Belina whipped up her hand and slammed the glass ball into his forehead. "For me to do that!"

Idilane staggered back, then dropped like a stone, the spell crackling and dissipating around him.

Reynard lunged out from behind the curtain, lifted Idilane by the lapel of his coat, and slammed a punch into his jaw. Idilane's head snapped back and the sorcerer was unconscious. Reynard dropped him, and started to search his pockets. He found a folder containing the photographs almost immediately, and rapidly flipped through them to make sure they were what he thought they were. Then he hesitated. "Some of these are not Belina."

Nicholas and Belina both leaned over his shoulder to see. Belina gasped, "The other girls! The murdered girls!"

Nicholas said in disgust, "He's an idiot. Look again, he may have included an image of himself actually committing the murders."

"Not everyone is up to your standards," Reynard told him. He handed the folder to Belina and she hastily looked through it, removing all the images of herself, as Reynard finished searching Idilane's clothes. Belina handed the folder back and Reynard put it into Idilane's coat. Reynard took the bag of dead fay dust and shook it out over the body as Belina folded the photographs of herself and retired to a corner to stuff them into some undergarment under her skirt.

Reynard stood. "Ready."

Nicholas was already at the door. He nodded to Belina.

She let out an ear-piercing scream. Nicholas flung the door open and shouted, "Who are you? Take your hands off that young lady!"

Reynard turned back to the window, slung himself over the balcony, and dropped down to the grassy verge at the edge of the walk. There was no streetlight nearby and he was observed only by some street urchins and a few peddlers waiting for the opera to let out. They were accustomed to seeing people exit the restaurant's private rooms precipitously and didn't pay much attention.

The story would be that Miss Shankir-Clare's escort had left her in the restaurant while he went to find a porter to summon their coach. Idilane had appeared and accosted her, and dragged her into a private room. Reynard's confederate, the restaurant's host, had seen this and sent a waiter to summon a magistrate from the street in case there was trouble. Belina would claim Idilane had threatened her and bragged of past victims that his captive fay had dispatched. Since all that was true, Reynard didn't have any doubt she would be able to carry it off.

A couple of streets over, Reynard found a telegraph office still open and sent a message to be delivered to the Shankir-Clare house. Then he retreated to the vicinity of the coffee-seller across the street from the opera's main entrance. Over the course of the next hour, as the audience left the opera, he saw more magistrates arrive, then a coach with more high-ranking magistrates and one of their sorcerers, then finally the Shankir-Clare coach with Lady Shankir-Clare, a maid, and Amadel. Amadel paused, spotted Reynard across the street, and they exchanged a nod before he went inside. Not long after that, Nicholas appeared.

Reynard purchased another cup of coffee as Nicholas sauntered casually across the street, and handed it to him as he joined him on the promenade. They waited until the Shankir-Clares reappeared with Belina. As Amadel handed Lady Shankir-Clare into their coach, Reynard saw Belina studying the street. She spotted them, but was too canny to wave.

The coach departed, and Reynard and Nicholas started down the promenade.

"So do we still believe Belina was targeted by Idilane?" Reynard asked. "I doubt it myself."

"Yes, the queen might have to look away from a scandal involving a Shankir-Clare daughter, but a Shankir-Clare daughter who is missing would be cause for turning the city upside down."

"Idilane may not have realized that. The family is discreet, not known in the lower circles he travels in." Reynard lifted his brows. "I think he was the target."

"It makes more sense. Perhaps the sorcerer who was forced to give him the fay familiar nudged him toward Belina, knowing that if she was a victim, Idilane would not escape." Nicholas looked preoccupied. "The other young women probably told no one where they were going or why. It shouldn't be too hard to discover at

least some of their identities, if their families have reported them missing. I'll do some preliminary work on it, and give it to you, to be passed on to the Shankir-Clare family."

It would give the magistrates another push in the right direction. And Reynard would enjoy a chance to see Belina again and bid her a more formal farewell. "This was a good day's work."

"It was adequate," Nicholas agreed. "Miss Shankir-Clare was helpful."

"She was." Reynard had been thinking it over while he waited, and he said, "It would be good to have a woman available for this sort of job. Fools like Idilane don't expect it. Someone who has a public reputation of some sort would be even better, less likely to be suspected."

"You're considering asking Miss Shankir-Clare?" Nicholas sounded dubious. "She has the nerve for it but she's still a little young—"

"No, of course not." Belina was too young. And more importantly if her mother found out, the reaction would not be salubrious. "We need someone who isn't under the eye of a concerned family." Thinking of Nicholas' theatrical infatuation, Reynard added, just to tease, "An actress, for instance."

The look Nicholas gave him was unreadable. "That might be possible."

end

Holy Places

*The next four stories are set in Cineth, before the events of the novel **The Wizard Hunters**, the first book of the Fall of Ile-Rien trilogy. "Holy Places" is the story of how Giliead and Ilias first met.*

Even at only eight seasons old, Ilias knew Cineth's god didn't really eat children, no matter what his older brother had told him. Castor was only two seasons older and Ilias knew he lied a lot, sometimes to try to frighten Ilias and more often to make himself sound knowledgeable. So when Castor pointed out the new Chosen Vessel at the market, Ilias wasn't sure whether to believe him or not.

He was sitting on his heels, watching ants build a nest in the dirt, bored by the adult haggling all around him. The afternoon sun was warm and bright and the market tents were all pitched under the big trees of the plaza. Men and women haggled over bags of grain, amphorae of wine and olive oil, fleeces, goatskins. The further end of the market was where the potters and metal-workers and other crafters spread their blankets to sell pottery and dyed cloth, knives and trinkets of carved wood and copper and polished stone jewelry. Ilias could smell the grilled meat someone was selling, and knew there would also be cheese and fruit and flatbread with honey. He also knew if he went for a closer look at any of it, his father would give him a clout to the head. Normally this wouldn't have stopped him; if Ilias minded clouts to the head he would have never done anything worth doing. But a tension in the air all through the day had told him that his father's quiet temper had already been pushed to the limit; pushing it further was not a good idea.

He had noticed the family long before Castor pointed them out because they were standing near the edge of the plaza, talking to some of the merchants who bought crops. The woman was young, her tawny hair braided with beads, and she wore a rich blue silk stole over her gown. The man with her wasn't wearing a sword, but then nobody but travelers carried serious weapons to market. He was tall, olive-skinned, with red-brown hair, like the Syprians who

had always lived on the coast, and was dressed in worn leather boots stamped with gold and a sun-faded green shirt over pants trimmed with leather. Though his hair was more than touched with gray, he still wore it in a long queue past his shoulders, and it tangled in his copper earrings. Ilias thought he must be a warrior, to attract such a young wife. Even though she wasn't as pretty as Ilias' mother, she looked wealthy, and could easily have bought younger husbands.

The only boy in the group was a little younger than Ilias; shouting with excitement, he ran past the man and was scooped up and captured, laughing delightedly. An older girl ran up to show the woman a beaded bracelet she must have just bought. The woman took the girl's hand to examine it, and the man leaned over to give it serious attention, the struggling boy still tucked easily under one arm.

Watching them, Ilias was torn between cynicism and a twist of bitter envy that soured his stomach, though he wasn't sure where it had come from. The adults actually seemed to be enjoying the company of the children, something he viewed with equal parts fascination and skepticism.

Castor's sandaled feet suddenly appeared and his brother said, "There he is. That's the new Chosen Vessel."

Ilias pushed to his feet, shaking dusty hair out of his eyes, frowning. He and Castor both came from inland Syprian lines, with light-colored hair and short stocky frames. Except Ilias had always been judged prettier by everyone in the family. His hair made long curls even when it was dirty, and Castor just looked like he was wearing a dusty mop. "Him?" he said with cautious approval, eyeing the man across the plaza.

The old Chosen Vessel, Livia, had been killed last year. Ilias had only known her well enough to recognize her in the market, but she had been Chosen Vessel his whole life, and he had hidden under his and Castor's bed and cried the night the word had come of her death. He had heard the poets' stories and knew the Chosen Vessel was given to the city by the local god. Its gift to the Vessel was the ability to see curses and track them back to the wizards who came to kill and snatch people away. Even Livia's presence in the town had been enough to keep away the dark creatures, the curselings the wizards created to come out in the night and destroy whole villages. Her death had made going out at dusk to help get the

sheep and goats into the pens a test of Ilias' courage; every moment he had expected something horrible to jump out of the brush, either to eat him or carry his family off to be a wizard's slaves. That was a fate he didn't even wish on Castor or his oldest sister Niale.

It hadn't been until days later that someone had finally explained that Menander, the Chosen Vessel from the Uplands, would protect Cineth until the new Vessel was ready to take up Livia's duties, and that it was the god's presence that kept the curselings away. Ilias had been relieved and desperate to hide it from Castor. Pretending he knew what he was talking about, he said now, "He looks like a good one."

"Not the man, shithead. That's Ranior, he was lawgiver years ago. The boy's the new Vessel." Castor looked down at him with utter contempt. "The god doesn't choose Vessels that are already grown."

Ilias rolled his eyes in exasperation, pretending he knew that. He had known it, actually, but in his limited experience Chosen Vessels were like lawgivers and warleaders; older people, with gray hair and lines on their faces. It was hard to remember that the new Chosen Vessel would start out as a child. "I know that. I meant the boy."

"Did not." Castor aimed a shove at him, which Ilias easily ducked. Castor's natural instinct to bully his younger siblings had been thwarted; though Ilias was smaller, he was already stronger, as Castor had been sickly for the first years of his life. Ilias was also an expert in dirty fighting; his cousin Amari, who had three elder sisters who had apparently been trying to murder her since birth, had taught him everything she knew. Ilias' older sisters were all too old to bully their youngest brother, but it helped keep Castor humble.

Watching Castor glare at him, Ilias could tell "the god eats children" lie was about to make another appearance, as a last-ditch attempt to make Ilias feel young and stupid.

But as Castor opened his mouth, Ilias' father shouted for them. Both boys flinched. Ilias eyed Castor, delivered the parting shot, "You're standing in ants," and ran to catch up with their father.

The days after that were filled with work and Ilias spent most of his

time in the herd pens. His mother had sent away the older boys from the neighboring farms who usually helped because she said they were gossiping too much, so there had been that much more work for Ilias, Castor, Amari, and their older sisters and cousins.

The day before had been wonderful; it had been the first time Ilias had been allowed to help with the sheep-shearing, and his father had spent most of his time patiently teaching Ilias and little supervising Castor.

Despite that, dinner was disappointing, not that Ilias saw or ate much of it. A year or so ago their cousins had had a crop fail and lost their farm, and had come to live at Finan House. The old stone house was like most country places, and arranged in a square around the atrium, the rooms facing in to the shaded portico. It still looked big to Ilias, but it was only one story tall, and not made to accommodate so many people. Ilias hadn't seen the inside of the dining room since the others had arrived. There were no boys in their cousin's family either, and the influx of extra girls put Ilias and Castor even lower in the family hierarchy.

Now Ilias sat out on the sparse grass in the atrium with Castor, Amari, and his only younger sibling, his sister Taelis, who had just started to walk. "This has nothing in it," Castor complained, poking at his bowl.

Ilias grimaced in agreement. The grain porridge, without meat, lentils, berries, or honey, or anything else that might have made it palatable, sat in his stomach like a stone. Niale had taken over the management of the house a season or so ago and she never got the amounts of anything right. "Didn't they bake bread today?"

"Yes. I saw Niale making it this morning." Amari was watching the door under the portico that opened into the family dining room, her brow furrowed. "But there won't be enough for us."

Castor frowned at her. "Why not?"

"Niale measured the grain wrong, dummy," Ilias told him, helping Taelis cram porridge into her mouth. She leaned against him, chewing happily, and dripped pasty lumps onto his pants.

There had been arguing all through dinner, the voices too muted for Ilias to quite make out, so he had been just as glad not to be crammed in the too warm dining room, even if there was better food in there. The spring breeze and lengthening twilight made the atrium cool and pleasant, though no one bothered to fill the stone-bordered fountain from the big cistern anymore. The flowerbeds

were all overgrown too, except for the patch where the squash and beans were planted. Some of the other girls were eating at the low table on the opposite end of the portico; Amari should have been with them but she didn't get on with her siblings or Ilias' older sisters. "There's no money," she said, sighing and poking at her own meal. She wasn't much older than Ilias but her family's troubles had made her grow up faster. "Your mother didn't get as much for the fleece as she thought she would. And Niale's going to need some of it to buy her husband."

Ilias rolled his eyes. "She would." Even at his age, it seemed a stupid thing for Niale to do now. To choose this year to demand to be married and to pick a man from a town family who wanted coins, instead of another farm family that would have been content with a few sheep and cows on account. And the man wasn't even a warrior.

Amari shrugged. "He'll help with the shearing." But she didn't sound as if she thought it was a good idea either.

"I do that now," Ilias said loftily. Castor sneered and Amari ruffled his hair.

They had finished eating and Castor was collecting the bowls. Ilias had picked up Taelis, meaning to take her off to the girls' quarters to get washed. He had just put a wet noisy kiss on top of her head to make her squeal and giggle, when he looked up and saw his father standing on the portico, staring at him.

Something in his father's expression made Ilias uneasy. He tucked Taelis up against his chest, while she obviously pulled at his hair with sticky hands. I didn't do anything, he thought, I think. He had so many chores he didn't have time to get into trouble. Oh shit, I was supposed to sweep out the shearing shed. Then his mother came out, furious, hair and bangles flying, and struck his father across the face.

Castor made a faint distressed noise and Amari looked away, her jaw set. Ilias just hefted Taelis and carried her off, hastily crossing the atrium. He found his sister Igenia in the girls' quarters and deposited Taelis with her, then climbed out the window. He knew his mother hated to be argued with, and he was surprised his father had made the effort, whatever it was about.

Outside the shelter of the house the wind was turning cold. In the growing dark, Ilias ran across the dirt-packed yard down to the big shed. It was just a big wooden building, its roof rounded

planks, the beams supporting it anchored by stone blocks. It was too dark to see inside it and he found flint and tinder in the light box and got an old clay oil lamp lit, wrinkling his nose at the rancid scent of olive oil gone bad. By its light he found a broom and carefully swept out the shed, though he didn't think it looked that dirty. That done, he put out the lamp and wandered outside.

It was full dark now, too dark to see the tree-covered hills or the fields though the cool wind carried the strong scent of pine and the not-so-distant sea. He washed his feet in the cold water of the trough and then sat on the edge, listening to crickets sing for a time. Then he remembered wizards and curselings, and the dark didn't feel so friendly anymore. Not long ago, he had heard a story in the market, of an isolated village where a wizard had come and cursed everyone to follow him away into the Barrens. The Chosen Vessel for Thalmyris had followed and managed to kill the wizard, but was only able to bring back a few survivors. The wizard had forced them to kill and eat the people who couldn't keep the pace, and once released from the curse by the Vessel, most had killed themselves in horror.

Ilias decided to go inside; even though the god was supposed to be watching for wizards, the Chosen Vessel was still only a boy.

He didn't bother going to the front door with its big stone porch; that was only for visitors. He went to the window in the small room off the kitchen that he and Castor shared. The room was barely large enough for a narrow wooden bedstead; it had originally stored amphorae for the kitchen and still smelled like it.

Ilias scrambled over the stone sill into the nearly pitch dark room. Castor said nothing though from the lack of snoring Ilias could tell he was still awake. He sat on the thin little rug to untie his sandals, feeling the cold stone through the cloth, then stripped off his shirt and pants.

He climbed up into the bed and groped for the blanket when a hard shove to the ribs caught him by surprise. He fell back out of the bed, landing on the hard floor with a thump. Angry, he scrambled to his feet, glancing worriedly toward the uncurtained door. It led into the big echoing kitchen, which had an archway out onto the portico, and he knew the sound carried right out to the bedrooms. "Stop it," he whispered harshly. "You want to wake somebody up?"

"Get away," Castor whispered back.

Ilias flung his arms up in bewildered fury. "I'm supposed to sleep here, shithead."

"Not anymore." He heard the bed squeak and blankets rustle as Castor must have rolled over to face the wall.

Ilias stood there a moment, baffled. Castor hated to sleep alone. Most people did, but Castor had nightmares and cried. And Ilias' blanket was on the bed, the one his mother had woven for him when he was born, with the colors worked into galleys and whales and leviathans. It was a symbol of Ilias' status in the family, such as it was, and the one thing he would take with him when someone finally bought him for a marriage. An event that couldn't happen fast enough as far as he was concerned at the moment. "Give me my blanket."

"It's not here." Castor's voice came out of the dark, rough and angry. "Niale took it."

Ilias sneered, doubting it. If Niale had actually stirred herself to help with the washing, it would have been the talk of dinner. But he was tired and Castor would get paid back for this in the morning. "Fine," he said finally, "You stink anyway."

Stiff with fury, he pulled his shirt and pants back on and went out through the kitchen. He padded along the portico to the younger girls' room and slipped inside the door. The room was warmer and he could hear a lot of sleepy breathing and Igenia's snoring. Pausing to let his eyes adjust, he made out the dim shapes of the three beds, the clothes chests and baskets. Stumbling over piles of fabric and stubbing his toes on invisible objects, he made his way to the bed Amari shared with Belia and Sirae. Fortunately, Amari slept on the outside. He poked her tentatively.

Her head lifted, hair tousled with sleep. "What's the matter?" she whispered, blinking.

"Castor kicked me out of bed."

Amari lifted the blanket, saying tiredly, "Come on."

He climbed into the warm bed, snuggling up to her side, telling himself this was better anyway. This bed had a feather-stuffed mattress and his and Castor's was filled with hay, which poked out through the cloth cover and itched. And Amari smelled pleasantly of a recent bath and gladiolus oil. But he couldn't help whispering, "Was there another fight? Why is Castor mad at me?"

Amari shifted to make more room for him, causing muttering and grumbles from the bed's other occupants. She wrapped an arm

around his waist and sighed into his hair. "No. Your mother called him in with the others to talk, but there wasn't any shouting. I don't know what they said."

Ilias put it down to Castor's moodiness and subsided into sleep.

Ilias didn't wake early enough and got trapped into being forced to wash and having his hair combed out and rebraided by Amari and other assorted sisters and cousins. That was the problem with having older girls in the house; either they were hostile like Niale or they wanted to treat him like a practice baby. The benefit was that he got to share their breakfast of pomegranates and bread with honey. It was so good he even let Igenia braid in some red clay beads and a feather. Niale looked in once, her face turning stony when she saw him. She twitched the door curtain closed again and they heard her sandals stamp on the portico, causing Amari to mutter, "Bitch." Igenia and the others giggled in appreciation.

He escaped finally and walked out onto the portico to find his mother, his father, and Niale standing in the atrium and staring at him. He froze, startled, and his mother motioned for him to come to her.

Ilias went reluctantly, dragging his bare feet in the grass. He had obviously done something. He saw Castor, watching from the other side of the portico, and pointed at him, hoping to deflect attention. "He pushed me out of bed."

Castor just looked away.

His mother lifted one of his braids, looking at the beads and feather. He looked up at her, proud of the fact that she was far more beautiful than the Chosen Vessel's mother. She wore a light lavender gown, sleeveless to reveal the olive leaf designs on her copper and silver armbands. Her hair was a rich dark brown, caught up with clasps set with polished purple stones. He knew she liked the girls better and that was the way of the world, but he sensed a chance to ingratiate himself and leaned against her skirts. He knew he was too big to be picked up but he was hoping for something. Instead she stepped away, asking him, "Did you eat this morning?"

"No," Ilias said earnestly. The only good thing about having so many siblings and cousins was that in the general confusion it was

sometimes possible to get fed two or three times for a single meal.

But his mother and father only exchanged an opaque look. His father said quietly, "You're certain? You won't change your mind?"

His mother's expression turned cold. "I've told you what I want. If you can't do it, I'll send you back to your family and find a man who can."

His father didn't reply, and his mother drew her skirts up and walked away. Then his father put a hand on Ilias' shoulder. "Come on, you can come into town with me."

Ilias threw an arch look at Castor, but his brother was staring at the paving stones between his feet.

He followed his father down the portico and out through the back entrance of the house. Ilias was surprised to see the gelding already saddled and waiting, its reins looped over the gate that kept the goats out of the other cistern. He ran to pet its nose and it dropped its head to investigate his hands for treats. It had a light brown coat, with a dark pattern of spots speckling its back and rear haunches. It was the horse he had had his first riding lessons on, and he dearly wanted it to be his someday, though realistically he knew it would be Castor's first.

He waited until his father settled into the light saddle, then reached up to be hauled on behind him. They rode out of the yard, past the herd pens and onto the track through the forest.

The sun broke through the scattered beeches and as the trail curved up the hill, Ilias craned his neck for his first view of the sea.

His father, who seldom said anything to him beyond "go here" and "do this," said suddenly, "You know you're not my son."

Ilias nodded, still trying to get a glimpse of blue water and breakers past the trees. "Yes. Castor and I are Timeron's sons, mother's second husband that died." It was why they looked different from all the others, but Ilias had only the vaguest memory of his birth father. Prominent women might have two or even three husbands. Though she wasn't particularly prominent, Delniea, Amari's mother, had two, Vendiead and Safronias. Niale had said it was why Delniea had lost her land, but the two men had been a great help in getting the hay in this season. "But there's always just been you," he added with a shrug.

His father made a noise as if he was about to speak, but said nothing.

They didn't take the quick way into town, but a smaller road

that went up into the deep forest over the hills. Without a chance of glimpsing a galley on the open sea heading toward Cineth's harbor, Ilias drifted off, leaning against his father's back. He woke up when his father reined in.

They were in a clearing near the rocky top of a hill, surrounded by pine on all sides. His father reached back for his arm, sliding him off the horse and depositing him on the gravelly dirt. "I need to do some business with the hunters. You wait for me here."

"All right." Ilias looked up at him, shaking the hair out of his eyes. He wanted to see the hunters too, but he knew appeals like that wouldn't be welcome. He glanced around at the rocky hilltop, at the pines clinging to the slopes above it. "Where are they?"

"Just past that hill there." His father pointed, but didn't look down at him, just turning the gelding and walking it away.

Ilias hopped a few steps, brushing the gravel off his feet, realizing that nobody had bothered to make him fetch his sandals. He wandered around a little, but the rock-studded outcrop didn't have much entertainment value about it. The wind pulled at his hair and blew dust, and it would probably be more comfortable down under the trees, but his father had said to stay here. And he didn't want to miss a chance to go to the market without Castor. He threw pebbles for a while, bored, then became intrigued by some oddly shaped stones and began to build a fort.

Engrossed in it, he constructed the palisade, the boatsheds and the causeway. Then his stomach grumbled and he noticed the sun had moved to directly overhead. He frowned up at it, squinting, thinking, *There's not going to be much of the day left for the market.* And it was time for the noon meal, though he couldn't smell anything cooking from the direction of the hunters' camp. His father had probably changed his mind about the market, but Ilias could always lie and tell Castor they went anyway.

Ilias looked around, finding he had run out of stones and pebbles in his immediate area. He dusted his hands off on his equally dusty pants and went to look for sticks to make the war galleys.

He scuffed his feet in the dirt, wandering around the craggy outcrop. Following it around the top of the little hill, he realized he had been in the lee; this side was much windier and seemed to be drawing cold right off the snow-capped tops of the distant mountains. He shivered but the ground here was covered with

bleached twigs and sticks, just what he needed.

He stared down for a moment, frowning. *No, it's bones.* He sat on his heels, poking at them thoughtfully, picking up one with a delicate curve, like the fastener of a hair clasp. They were animal bones or fish bones, like those the little water lizards left beside streams. He investigated further, poking into nooks and crannies, searching for some evidence of the small predator that lived here. Then he picked up a smooth round rock.

Looking at it, seeing and not seeing the holes for eyes and nose, it seemed a long time before he admitted to himself that what he was holding was a small human skull.

Ilias set it down with care, not wanting to make anything angry. Unburied or unburned bodies meant no rites had been done, and the dead person's shade must still wander this area. But how could bodies go unburied when the hunters' camp was so close? He stood up, moving carefully over the gravel and rocks. But he hadn't heard anyone, couldn't smell any woodsmoke, and no one had passed by.

He counted six more skulls, none quite as large as his.

He stood still for a long time, biting his lip, then started toward the hill his father had pointed out, where the camp should be. *I just want to look at it. I won't go down and bother him.*

It wasn't a long walk, but the rocks were beginning to hurt his feet, and he should have been wearing boots for it. He had a hand-me-down pair from Castor at home, as useful there as his forgotten sandals. As the hill steepened up into a cliff face, the walk became a scramble, and he dug his fingers into the dirt and dried grass. He reached the top, relieved, and looked out over the little valley.

The empty little valley. There was a meadow with high grass, undisturbed by horses or people, and a stream near the far end, spilling over rocks to disappear into the trees down the slope. There hadn't been a camp here for days, from the look of the undisturbed grass. Ilias shifted uneasily, unwilling to admit that there was a cold chill creeping up his back.

He climbed down and went around the rocks, back to the fort. He sat in the dirt next to it, his arms wrapped tightly around his knees. His eyes stung from unshed tears though he wouldn't tell himself why he wanted to cry. *It's a mistake*, he repeated, over and over again. *Or you didn't understand.* Adults said things all the time that didn't mean what you thought they meant. *He'll be back.* After a time, when the sun had moved further into afternoon, he wiped

his nose on his sleeve and went back to work on the fort.

But the afternoon lengthened into twilight and his father didn't return.

The light was starting to fail, and Ilias' stomach was cramping with hunger and his throat was dry. He was still pretending to play with the fort when the breeze turned unexpectedly chill, lifting his hair and cutting right through his lightly woven shirt. He looked up, shivering, and saw another boy crouched in the dirt, not ten paces away.

Something told Ilias immediately that he was looking at a shade. The boy was crouched in the lee of a rock, as if trying to find protection from the wind. He was much younger than Ilias, maybe Taelis' age, if that. His skin was a pearly pale, like the inside of a seashell, but tinged with blue, his hair dark and matted. He wore only a light tunic, grubby and torn. Ilias met his eyes, and they were old and knowing. Those eyes said, *You're big enough to walk down off this hill. I wasn't.*

Ilias jerked his head away, taking a sharp breath. Numb, he pushed to his feet. He tried not to look at the growing pools of shadow under the rocky crags, not wanting to see more small shades looking back at him.

He stood for a long moment, shivering. The forest was dark, the sharp contrast between the sunlight still lingering on the top of the hill and the shadows under the heavy green branches making it look like another world. Then he started to walk.

The ground was softer, but in the deep green twilight he couldn't see more than a few paces ahead or behind. Ilias had been out in the meadows near home in the dark, and on the beach and in the orchards, but never in the forest, not alone. He hesitated, but the path his father had used was impossible to see. He started downhill, knowing the road had to be down there somewhere.

Nobody talked about it, but everybody knew people took unwanted babies to a place out in the hills to die. Ilias knew this had to be the place. He paused, one hand on the rough bark of a tree, his bare feet balanced on its thick roots. "I didn't do anything wrong," he muttered, the unwanted tears stinging his eyes again. His family wasn't that poor, that they couldn't afford to feed him. And he wasn't a baby. He helped with the herding and the feeding and watering. He helped take care of Taelis. When he was older, somebody like Amari would want to buy him for a marriage. And

his father had taught him to shear sheep yesterday.

I forgot to sweep out the shed. But he had done it before he went to bed, surely they would have seen it this morning. He gritted his teeth, remembering Castor kicking him out of bed last night, saying he didn't sleep there anymore. *He knew.* Amari and the other girls hadn't known, except for Niale, but Castor had. He knew now that Castor hadn't been lying when he had said Niale had taken Ilias' blanket. It was part of making it look like he had never existed.

Maybe Ilias hadn't done as well at the sheep-shearing as he had thought. Maybe it had been some kind of test that he had failed without knowing it. But he didn't see how that was possible. He had done well for his size, as good as Castor who was bigger and older. It must have been something else. He pushed off from the tree, wincing as he stepped on a splintered branch.

He walked a long time, long after the night deepened and he could only glimpse patches of moonlight through the branches, until the whole world was darkness and rustling leaves and there had never been anything else. His legs ached and his feet hurt from stumbling on pine cones and hidden rocks. Everything he had ever been punished for as far back as he could remember came back to him in painful detail, but none of it seemed bad enough for this. Maybe they just wanted to scare him.

He barely recognized the stream when he heard it, didn't realize it was there until he tripped on a root and fell on the muddy bank. He crawled down to it, put both hands in the icy cold water and drank.

The water set heavily in his stomach when he pushed himself up and wiped his mouth. He was shaking with weariness but he didn't want to sleep here. *If I die here no one will find my body and do the rites.* He didn't want to be a shade and he didn't know how long it would take him to die. He struggled to his feet, waded across the cold stream, and kept walking.

Some long time later he blinked, startled to find himself lying on cold hard-packed dirt. He pushed himself up, yawning. It was still night, but a little more moonlight fell through the leafy branches above, enough to see he had found the road. He must have just collapsed on it and fallen asleep. *I guess I wasn't dying,* he thought in relief. He rubbed his gritty eyes. His stomach felt completely hollow, like the inside of a drinking gourd, sloshing with the water he had drunk. He didn't feel like he was dying, except maybe in his

feet. Maybe the only reason he had thought he was dying at all was that children left out in the hill place always died.

He managed to stand, stumbling and wincing. The dirt wasn't much easier to walk on and the openness of the road made him feel exposed, as if things were watching him in the dark that hadn't been able to see him among the trees. He limped forward, biting his lip at each step, trying to remember how far they had come before his father had turned off the road.

Maybe this was the test itself. Maybe if he found his way back tonight that would prove he was good enough to stay. But Castor's words kept coming back to him; there was a finality there that chilled him more than the cold dirt and the night breeze. His mother had always loved the girls best, but he had always thought he was the favored boy. Everyone always said he was prettier than Castor, that he looked more like his father Timeron, and it had always been good for extra treats on festival days. If he had known, if he had had any warning at all, he could have tried harder to be good.

After a long painful time of limping on more or less level ground, Ilias found himself toiling up a hill. Maybe things just felt different in the dark, but he didn't remember a grade this steep. The road was rough here too, and he kept stumbling into holes. Rubbing an aching knee, he stopped, coming to a reluctant realization: there was no hill like this on the road home. The wagon would have trouble on this slope and he knew he would have remembered it distinctly.

Ilias gritted his teeth against a sob and wiped his grimy face on his sleeve, confronting two thoughts: *This is the wrong way and even if you find your way home, they could just take you right back to the hill.* He shook the second one off, telling himself, *no, it's just a test.* He had to figure out what he had done and find a way to make it right. And none of that mattered if he didn't figure out where he was.

He had started out at the right point and had crossed the stream, but he must have veered off a straight path in the forest. He didn't even know if this was the right road. It might not lead to someone's farm at all, it might lead right out of Cineth's territory altogether.

Sudden fear cramped his stomach as he wondered if he had gone beyond the safety of the god's bounds, if this was a place where wizards and curselings roamed. He turned back and stopped again,

staring. In the darkness not too far distant, he saw a flicker of firelight. In another heartbeat it was gone.

Ilias took a couple of steps forward, squinting hard into the dark, his heart pounding. He could just see a faint glow. *It could be home*, a thought whispered, but he knew in his gut it wasn't. But it had to be a torch or a lamp in a house, mostly blocked by trees or a fold of rock. Then the wind brought him a snatch of sound, hoofbeats on packed dirt.

Limping and stumbling, he ran back down the road. He found the edge of it by falling into a ravine and rolling through brambles. He scrabbled to his feet, trying to keep going straight and hoping he wasn't doing as badly at it as he had coming through the upper forest. He blundered into rocks, trees, up another small rise and stumbled to a halt.

Spread out below, cupped in the darkness of a small valley, was a big farmstead. Oil-lamps hanging in the portico lit the shadowy outlines of a big flat-roofed two-story stone house. More torches and lamps let him catch glimpses of outbuildings, herd pens, grapevines, orchards, and a large garden. Several men and women were standing around in the yard talking, the wind bringing him snatches of their voices. His heart squeezed with relief and he took a sharp breath, wiping his nose on his sleeve. It wasn't home, and it wasn't a near neighbor, though he might not be able to recognize the place in the dark. *I did it*. He hadn't found his home, but he had found somebody's home, and it had to count for something.

Ilias felt his way down the hill, his hands skimming the lush grass. Moving parallel to the house, he finally tripped over a rock and found the edge of a rough cart track that must lead down to the farmyard. He padded down it, his feet throbbing with every step. The track curved around the hill, leveling out as it approached the large dirt yard. He could hear the horses more clearly now, he just wasn't certain where they were.

"What's that?" someone shouted.

Still some distance from the torchlit yard, Ilias stopped, turning back as he heard hoofbeats. He saw horses and riders, dark frightening shapes, and backed hastily away.

An unfamiliar voice called out, "A curseling!"

Where? Ilias thought, stumbling and looking around in alarm. He flinched away from a form that seemed to materialize right out of the dark. "I'll tell you when there's a curseling, you idiot." The

speaker was a sour-voiced man, suddenly standing over him.

"What is it, Menander?" another man asked. His voice was deep and calm, and the confusion seemed to lessen when he spoke. Ilias saw a form swing down from the nearest horse, tossing the reins to another shadow shape. He could smell horse sweat and leather.

"It's a boy." The sour-voiced man sat on his heels to face him. People came toward them from the farmyard, one man carrying a torch. As the light fell on them Ilias blinked sweat and dirt out of his eyes to see that Menander was a man older than his father, inland Symprian, with light-colored hair braided back in a long queue. "Now who are you?"

"Ilias." He heard his own voice sound raspy from the dust of the road. He stared at the sword hilt poking up above the man's shoulder, wishing he could touch it. It was carved with a ram's head, the scrolled horns delicately detailed.

"He's not from Andrien village, and there's no other farms near here." That was the deep-voiced man, standing beside them now. Startled, Ilias looked up to recognize the man he had seen at the market days ago, Ranior, who had been lawgiver. The man with the boy Chosen Vessel. He was wearing a sword too, its hilt carved like a gull's wing. The men in Finan House never wore their swords, and Ilias desperately wanted a closer look at these. "No curses?" Ranior asked, frowning slightly.

"Not a one." Menander reached down to touch one of Ilias' feet, frowning at the bloody dirt that came away on fingers. *Curses?* Ilias thought, baffled, then realized with a shock that this must be the Menander, the Uplands' Chosen Vessel, who was watching over Cineth now that Livia was dead. "You've walked a long way, haven't you?"

Ilias wasn't sure how to answer that question, so he kept silent. Menander didn't press, asking instead, "Are you alone out here?"

That one he could answer. Ilias nodded. "I was on the road and I saw the light from the house."

"Where did you come from, son?" Ranior asked quietly.

"I—" Ilias looked up into the man's kind face and for a moment couldn't speak. This morning he would have told them the truth without a heartbeat's hesitation. He had never been a liar, except to Castor and his sisters and cousins. He knew the difference between lying to annoy a sibling or to get an extra helping of dinner and a serious lie. But that was this morning, and this day had made

it all different. "I got lost," he finished. "My father said we'd go to the market, but I got separated from him and I've been trying to get home. But I took the wrong way through the forest and missed the path, and I think it was the wrong road. I don't know where I am."

He must have sounded every bit as miserable as he was, because no one questioned it. Menander lifted his brows and pushed to his feet. Ranior leaned down and scooped Ilias up, carrying him toward the house.

The yard was a confusion of horses and people and torchlight. Ilias winced away from it, relieved when Ranior carried him up the steps and into a lamplit entry hall. Ilias caught a glimpse of double doors opening into the atrium and dull red walls. The floor was a mosaic of a seascape with galleys sailing among forested islands. Ranior carried him through to another room, past two men who seemed to be guarding the door.

This room had dark blue walls, with border paintings of olive and laurel leaves. Bowl-shaped oil lamps, smelling sweetly of good olive oil, lit the room. There was an older girl there, the girl Ilias had seen with Ranior in Cineth, sitting on a cushioned bench with her legs curled up. She looked up, staring in surprise as Ranior deposited Ilias next to her. "Who's this?" She wore a sleeveless yellow shirt that was too big for her and a pair of doeskin pants with grass stains on the knees. The kind of clothes girls and women wore to ride or take sheep to market or sail on a boat, not that the women in Ilias' house ever did those things.

"We found him on the wagon track, lost," Ranior told her, already heading out of the room again. "Take care of him for me, Irissa." He stopped to ask the two guards, "Where's Treian?"

"He's taking a look around the atrium," one told him. He had a badly scarred face. The other man was missing his right arm below the elbow. They both looked like fishers or gleaners, wearing shabby sun-faded shirts and the short kilts most people wore on small boats, their only ornaments made of wood or shell. Except they had swords across their backs, soldiers' swords, plain unornamented steel, with leather wrapped around the hilts. The man hesitated, watching Ranior worriedly. "They're saying it's the one that got Livia. Is that true?"

Ranior paused, his face set, harshly etched in the candlelight. "I don't know, Cylides. Menander hasn't had a good look at him yet."

Ranior's bootsteps sounded loud on the tiles as he went back

toward the front entrance. Irissa was looking at Ilias in confusion. Her brown hair was held back in frazzled braids and she wore copper rings in her ears. With a bewildered expression, she asked, "Did the wizard try to steal you?"

"No." Ilias stared at her, baffled. He looked at the two men, who were staring watchfully out the door. Past them, Ilias could see the other room was lit with more bowl-shaped oil lamps, and had dining couches and a low table. A wide doorway, banded by a couple of painted columns, opened out onto the atrium. The one called Cylides glanced at him, and the lamplight caught the gleam of silver among the scarring on his cheek. Ilias looked at Irissa again. "There... There can't be a wizard here." There were people here, and lights, and wizards were only in dark places, the deep forest, the hills. But he remembered the story about the isolated village and felt a chill settle in his stomach. But she had to be lying, the way Castor lied.

"There is one here. It's trying to kill my brother." Irissa took one of his feet, wincing in sympathy. Ilias was distracted by how awful they looked in the lamplight, all dirt and blood. "You've been walking barefoot on the road? How far?"

"Ow," Ilias told her so she would be careful, though she hadn't hurt him yet. He was wary of older girls on principle, knowing that some could be friends like Amari, some indifferent, and others outright enemies. "I don't know, I'm lost. There's a real wizard, not a made-up one?"

"Very real." Irissa pushed to her feet, biting her lip as she looked around the room. "I don't have any water or bandages, and we're not supposed to leave the room. Does it hurt very badly?"

"No," he told her, still not sure she was telling the truth about the wizard. For all the times he and Castor had seen curselings in shadows, part of him had known it was just pretend. But his older sisters and cousins usually hadn't bothered to lie to him, except when Niale told him his mother hated him.

"We can send for water when Treian comes back," the man with one arm told her, still keeping his eyes on the torchlit atrium.

There was a red-glazed warming jar on the hearth, with a set of matching cups. Irissa dipped a cupful out of the jar and brought it to Ilias. At the smell of warm wine mixed with honey and water, Ilias forgot everything else while he gulped it down. He was thirsty and this was a treat he usually only got when he was sick. It

soothed his throat and warmed his stomach and for a moment all he wanted to do was lie down on the cushions and sleep. Irissa brought him another cup before he could ask. She told him, "I'm Irissa, and that's Cylides and Macritus. They're from Andrien village. What's your name? Do we know your family?"

"Ilias. I don't know. I don't think so." He didn't think that was a lie. He had never been taken to visit this house as far as he could remember, and he had never seen his father talk to Ranior in the market. He drained the second cup and wiped his mouth on his sleeve, saying hurriedly, "How can there be a wizard here? Is it really after your brother?" He wasn't sure why he was reluctant to give her his family name, he just knew he wanted to delay the moment as long as possible. It would mean things would change, and right now this room felt safe, wizard or not. He knew there were two worlds now, one where people took care of you and one where they didn't. Having gotten back into the first one, he meant to stay in it as long as possible.

Irissa's brow furrowed as she looked at the couch on the other side of the room. "Gilead is the next Chosen Vessel. Didn't you know that?"

Ilias looked blankly at the other couch and realized the lumpy blankets piled there were actually covering another boy. He could see tufts of brown hair sticking up past the reds and golds of the dyed wool. "I knew that," he said automatically. Maybe he hadn't believed it until just now.

At the doorway, Macritus, the man with the missing arm, shifted impatiently. "What's he doing?" he said, sounding as if he was mostly talking to himself. "Treian?" he called softly.

A faint sound pulled Ilias' attention back to the other couch. Gilead was awake and sitting up, regarding him with grave blue eyes. He was just a boy, a little younger than Ilias, with wavy brown hair coming out of his braids and a mark on his cheek from a fold in the pillow. "Treian's not there," Gilead said, blinking sleepily at Irissa.

"He's supposed to be." Irissa glanced back at him impatiently, but Ilias thought she was more worried than annoyed. "Macritus, could you—"

"Don't." Gilead's voice was suddenly urgent. He shifted, sitting up on his knees, pushing the blanket down. "He's out there, 'Rissa."

Macritus was still looking out into the other room and the

atrium, frowning, but Cylides turned to look at Giliead, asking, "What do you see, Gil?"

Between one heartbeat and the next, the doorway filled with a solid darkness, the cold breath of death. Ilias yelped, scrambling back and tumbling off the couch, staring in frightened incomprehension. Irissa fell over the couch as the darkness rolled over Cylides and Macritus, even as the two men shouted in alarm and stumbled backward.

The darkness struck Ilias and knocked him backward, and the room went black. He lay on the tile floor, blind, cold and numb, so shocked he couldn't even feel terror. It was like standing in the surf on the beach and being struck by a sudden powerful wave; the darkness took his breath just the way the foamy water would have. After another moment it passed and he could see the blue-painted ceiling again, the firelight reflecting off it as if nothing had happened.

Dizzy and sick, Ilias rolled over and saw a strange man standing in the room. He was young, dark hair gathered in a queue, his jaw set, his eyes grimly determined. His clothes were fine, a dark green sleeveless shirt and pants, boots and a broad leather belt stamped with blue and gold designs, silver rings in his ears. There was blood on his hands, staining a copper and leather wristband, as if he had been butchering meat.

Cylides and Macritus lay tumbled on the floor, unmoving, and Irissa was sprawled on the couch, her expression dazed, shaking her head uncertainly. Ilias realized suddenly that the darkness had been exactly like a sea wave; it had struck harder at the people who had been standing up. He had been closer to the floor and it had mostly rolled right over him.

The strange man's eyes went to Ilias and moved dismissively away. Then he saw Giliead still sitting on the couch. He smiled, an oddly sweet expression, and said, "There you are, boy. I've been looking for you."

Wizard, Ilias thought. It was a poet's story come terribly alive. He opened his mouth to yell for help and it was suddenly as if there wasn't a breath of air in the room; his voice came out as a near-silent croak.

Still crouched on the cushions, Giliead watched him evenly. He didn't look like a boy confronting a monster. His expression was mildly curious, as if he had idly wondered what this moment would

be like. He said, "I was always here."

The wizard took a step forward, still smiling but eyeing Giliead narrowly. Tumbled between the couch and the wall, Irissa struggled weakly to get up. Ilias saw a cup had fallen beside the table leg and started to edge toward it. He felt as if he was trapped in one of Castor's horror stories of curselings and wizard-slaves. The wizard ignored both him and Irissa, still watching Giliead. He said, "Menander was a fool to think he could protect you."

He wants to make Giliead afraid, Ilias thought, knowing it by instinct. Ilias stretched and reached the cup, lifting it uncertainly, meaning to throw it. Giliead flicked a look at him and Ilias thought the other boy didn't want him to interfere, at least not yet. He kept hold of the cup and didn't move, trying to breathe as quietly as possible.

Giliead told the wizard, "The god protects me."

From the couch Irissa managed to speak, her voice a strained croak. "Menander's here, he'll kill you!"

Ignoring her, the wizard took two long steps suddenly, reaching down toward Ilias. Before he could scramble back the man grabbed his hair, yanking him half off the floor. Still watching Giliead, he said, "Silly little boy. Gods don't protect Chosen Vessels."

Ilias clawed at the painful grip, still unable to cry out, but the man had jerked him up so his toes barely touched the ground. His eyes blurry from pain tears, he saw Giliead show emotion for the first time. His eyes narrowed, the other boy looked angry. Giliead said, "You let him go."

A door banged somewhere and a woman burst into the dining room. Ilias recognized her from the market, but her hair was tied back now and she wore a red-brown dress, and her face was strained and angry in the lamplight. She carried a weapon Ilias had only seen a few times before, a long-handled knife with a hook on the end, that he knew was for fighting on war galleys. She saw the wizard and froze for a heartbeat, her eyes widening in shock as she looked from the wizard to Giliead, then to Irissa still trying desperately to push herself up off the couch.

The wizard said with an easy smile, "Come and join us, Karima, the more the better."

"How did you—" she started to ask, then must have decided it didn't matter. Her face hardened and she lifted the knife, starting forward.

Giliead said sharply, "Mother, don't. You need to get out of the doorway."

Karima stopped, throwing him a startled look. *She won't do it*, Ilias thought, despairing though he didn't know why it was important. Mothers didn't listen to their children at the best of times, let alone a moment like this. Emotions flicked across Karima's face, uncertainty, fear, resolve. Then she stepped sideways, out of the doorway.

The wizard started toward Giliead, dragging a struggling Ilias with him. "Don't try to trick me, boy, there's no one to help you. Menander is searching for me in the woods again, and the others follow him."

Giliead just cocked his head thoughtfully. "You shouldn't have used curses. You were real quiet up to then, and it couldn't hear you."

The man stopped. Ilias couldn't see his face but he heard him breathing hard, and he felt something change in the room, as if the air smelled different, or pressed harder on his skin.

"There's a thing you don't know," Giliead continued, still calmly, "The god doesn't protect the grown Chosen Vessels. But it's different when we're children."

Try as Ilias might later, he couldn't remember what the god looked like, though Gil always claimed it had come down the chimney and passed within a pace of him.

Ilias saw the puff of ash from the hearth, and heard the wizard yell in alarm, loud and shrill. He let go of Ilias' hair and Ilias fell, scrabbling rapidly away. He looked back in time to see the wizard fly through the doorway as if he had been shot out of a bow. He struck the low dining table with a crash and the wood shattered beneath him, leaving the wizard sprawled on the tile floor, unmoving.

A clamor of shouts and running footsteps came from the front of the house. Karima stepped toward the wizard's prone body, lifting the boat knife cautiously, but the man just lay there, one last breath sighing out of his limp body. If she hadn't moved out of the way, Karima would be smashed under him now.

Irissa managed to sit up, clutching her head with a groan. "It took the god long enough. I thought he was going to kill all of us," she muttered. Cylides and Macritus both began to stir back to consciousness.

Ilias shoved himself upright and limped over to Giliead. The younger boy slipped off the couch, standing barefoot in an oversized blue shirt. An ordinary boy again, he chewed self-consciously on his thumbnail. "Is he dead?" Ilias asked him quietly. The wizard looked dead but he wanted to be certain.

Giliead nodded solemnly. "Yes."

"Good." Ilias took his hand and limped into the dining room with him.

The room and the atrium beyond seemed full of people suddenly, calling out in alarm, talking, anxiously leaning over the two half-conscious guards, helping Irissa stand. Someone scooped Giliead up and when Ilias stumbled and nearly fell, someone grabbed him too.

They ended up in the kitchen, with herbs bundled up to dry hanging from the rafters and big storage amphorae stacked against the walls. It was still pleasantly warm from the banked fire in the big cooking hearth. There were a lot of people in there too, most of them armed, talking urgently. In all the confusion, Ilias got handed over to a young woman called Sabiras, who was probably Niale's age, but her olive skin had darkened from the sun and her hands were calloused and hard from work. She wore loose pants and a shirt with the sleeves tied back, and her jewelry was all shells, with polished cowries on her armbands. She set him down beside the hearth and made concerned noises over his feet. She got some warm water from the pot sitting in the coals and cleaned the cuts, which hurt but he managed to bite his lip and not cry. If his behavior was going to be reported to his mother, he wanted to be sure he didn't make any mistakes. And after what had just happened with the wizard, it seemed a small thing to cry over.

Irissa sat next to him, holding a cup of warm wine someone had given her. "Mother, I think the wizard did something to Treian," she said. Her hands were shaking a little, making the liquid tremble inside the red-glazed cup, but her voice was firm. "We called but he didn't come."

Karima bit her lip, her expression still tense. She kept absently squeezing Giliead's shoulders, as if making sure he was still there. "They're searching the house now. If he's hurt, they'll find him."

"He's dead," Giliead told her, still calmly. "The god's showing me. I think he's out in the woods. Treian, I mean. It thinks the wizard killed him when he got separated from the others after dusk,

and the wizard made a curse on himself so they thought he was Treian." Giliead frowned in concentration, his eyes distant. "It wasn't a good curse. Not good, I mean it didn't work well. He had to stay in the dark, or people would have seen he wasn't Treian. The god says he must have known Menander would see through it, and so he had to act when he realized Menander and Ranior were returning." He blinked. "Can I go to bed now? I'm sleepy."

Ilias stared, then looked at Karima and Irissa, both listening in growing consternation. Appalled, Karima said under her breath, "He was here in the house all that time. And the motherless bastard killed Treian." She pushed to her feet, shaking her head.

Ilias took a sharp breath. "He waved his hand and we couldn't —"

Sabiras put a hand over his mouth. Ilias looked up in surprise. "You were too startled to call out, it happened too fast. That's what happened, isn't it?" She looked at Irissa pointedly. "Irissa?"

Irissa looked blank for a moment, then nodded in startled comprehension. Ilias realized others in the room were listening and that Karima was staring at him with concentrated intensity, as if willing him to make the right answer. He didn't understand but he nodded emphatically. Sabiras removed her hand, saying, "Good."

Ranior and Menander returned, but Ilias didn't see them, only heard them talking out in the atrium. He got a quick bath in warm water, and a clean shirt to put on that was far too big for him. Irissa told Sabiras that Ilias hadn't eaten all day, and Sabiras brought him a bowl with lentils and bread soaked in mutton broth, and the fact that these people still had bread this late in the day just confirmed Ilias' opinion of Niale's bad management of their house.

They didn't ask him any questions, until Sabiras carried him to a bedroom on the opposite side of the portico. It was nearly as big as the room Ilias' sisters and cousins slept in, but there were sheepskin rugs, and only one bed and a couple of clothes and blanket chests. It wasn't as warm as the kitchen, though the winter shutters in the outside window were tightly closed.

Giliead was already in bed, his face buried in the pillow, with Karima seated on a stool nearby. As Sabiras put him down on the bed, Karima asked him, "Ilias, how did you get lost today?"

When she smiled, she was pretty, nearly as pretty as his mother. "On the way to town."

"You walked from Cineth?" Sabiras asked, brows lifted.

"No, we didn't go all the way there. I got lost on the way." He rubbed his eyes, just wanting them to stop. He was more glad than ever that he had lied. He was being treated like a lost child; he wasn't sure what would have been different if they knew he had been...left, but he wasn't willing to take the chance. "I'm sleepy."

Karima and Sabiras exchanged a look he couldn't read, but they didn't ask him any more questions. Sabiras tucked him under the blankets and they both left the room.

Giliead rolled over and cuddled up next to his side, and Ilias put an arm around him. Ilias hesitated, then asked, "Why wouldn't Sabiras let me tell them why I didn't call for help?"

Giliead blinked. "Because it was a curse on you and Irissa. It's gone now, and it didn't do anything to you. But people might hear about it, and say you should have a curse mark, like Cylides."

Ilias knew what a curse mark was. People who had been under a wizard's curse had to have a silver half-moon branded into their cheek. He had never seen one before because those people weren't supposed to be around normal people. He wanted to ask a question, but he couldn't put it into words.

Giliead seemed to know what he wanted to ask. "Cylides needs a place to live, so he lives in Andrien village, down on the beach. Ranior says having a curse mark doesn't mean he's done anything wrong. It means a wizard did something wrong to him."

Ilias asked, "So why does he have to have it? It isn't fair."

Giliead shrugged, nestling into the pillow. "Because people are so afraid of curses. Anything that has to do with them." He eyed Ilias thoughtfully. "Ranior says people are afraid of Chosen Vessels, too."

"I'm not," Ilias said automatically, before realizing it was true. He had seen a wizard now, he knew what there was to fear, and it wasn't Giliead or Menander. He could hear voices, through the shutters and from the doorway, and knew there were people on guard. But there had been people on guard when the first wizard got in. "What if another one comes?" he said aloud.

Giliead shook his head, barely awake. "The god's under the bed."

Ilias bit his lip. He didn't think Giliead was lying, and he didn't

want to look. But he was too exhausted not to drift off, and he slept soundly.

The next day was mostly spent sleeping. Ilias finally woke buried in the blankets, feeling hot and a little sick, with Giliead using his back as waves to sail a toy boat on.

The shutters were open, revealing warm afternoon sun and the branches of an olive tree moving gently in the breeze. Blearily, he crawled out of bed onto the sheepskin rug in front of the banked hearthfire. Giliead had been up for some time, judging by the scatter of wooden toys. Remembering last night, Ilias leaned down to cast a suspicious look under the bed, but there was nothing there but a little dust.

Ilias examined his feet with a grimace. The left one felt fine, if tender. The right was swollen, the skin stretched tight, and the cuts on the heel and just below his toes were red and ugly. He didn't think he could walk on it, at least not today.

He picked up a toy galley, trying to think what to do. The boat was scarcely bigger than his cupped hands, but precisely carved, the eye for the ship's soul carefully picked out over the bow. It was old, with traces of the paint that handling had worn off.

"Ranior made that for my sister," Giliead told him, settling next to him. His fine hair had completely come out of his braids and he was still wearing the same shirt he had slept in. "She gave it to me. She's going to be a captain and sail to the Chaeans."

"Is she your only sister?" Ilias asked absently, turning the boat over. He had a wooden horse, not carved as well as this, and battered from years of play. It had come from Timeron and Castor hadn't wanted it anymore, so it had been Ilias' to play with. "If she's the only girl, then she can't go to sea. She has to stay here and take care of your family's land, so the people who live here don't starve."

Giliead frowned, taking the toy ship back as if Ilias had just lost the right to hold it. "She can be a captain if she wants."

It wasn't worth arguing about. Only women could own things like houses and land.

Sabiras came in then, looked at Ilias' feet, and made him get back on the bed.

She cleaned Ilias' cuts again and put on smelly ointment and

bound his right foot up to keep it clean. Then she made up for it by bringing them bread, fresh and still warm, and fish with pickle sauce and lentils. Ilias ate all of his and half of Giliead's portion, since the younger boy had been awake earlier for breakfast. Sabiras lectured him on staying in the bed, not walking around and especially not going out in the atrium or the farmyard to play in the dirt.

Ilias felt better after the food. "Are there still wizards outside?" he asked her, scraping the last of the sauce off the plate. Until the wizards were gone, he couldn't walk home.

Sabiras hesitated, and Giliead, sprawled on the foot of the bed and pushing another wooden boat across the fold of the blankets, answered for her. "There's no curses, so there's no wizards."

She glanced at Giliead a little uncomfortably, then quickly smiled at Ilias to hide it. "There you go. That's what Menander says as well."

Ilias got out of bed as soon as she left, but it really did hurt to walk. So he played with Giliead on the floor, naming the wooden toys after famous wizards and Chosen Vessels from the poets' stories, and reenacting their battles. Ilias hadn't played like this in a long time; Castor had decided he was too old for these kinds of games and was too busy trying to bully Ilias to want to do anything interesting. Giliead was still young enough to have fun.

The house was quiet except for the occasional reassuring sounds of Sabiras or someone else talking out in the passage, or the lowing of a cow out in the fields. Once Ilias heard Ranior's voice outside, speaking to someone in a serious tone as the leaves crunched under their boots. It was odd to be in a house so quiet, to have a whole room to themselves for their play, but Irissa seemed to be Giliead's only sibling.

He was so wrapped up in the game, he didn't even know Karima was watching them until Giliead, laughing at Ilias' rendition of Ifaea finding the edge of the world, rolled onto his back, smiling, and said, "Hello, mother."

"Hello, Gil." She smiled at him openly, not hesitantly the way Sabiras did. "Menander needs you to talk to the god for him. Can you do that?"

"It's in the hay barn, where it's dark and cool. It doesn't like bright light," Giliead told her, rolling over to prop his chin on his hands. He explained to Ilias, "Menander could talk to the god

himself, like he talks to the Uplands god, but he wants me to practice. Our god likes him, though. He sounds like pine needles in the wind."

Ilias nodded seriously, fascinated. It was a novelty to talk to someone who told you interesting things, rather than badly made-up lies.

Karima sat on the floor, her green dress pooled around her. "Ilias, let me see your feet." Her voice, calm and firm, was impossible to disobey and he shifted glumly to face her, stretching his legs out. She looked him in the face when she spoke to him, and he couldn't remember when his mother had last done that.

He held his breath as she took his foot, but she handled it gently, not hurting him. "You need to listen to Sabiras and not walk on this," she told him, adding almost absently, "What's your family name?"

"Finan," Ilias said, then bit his lip. She had caught him by surprise, before he could decide to lie.

She nodded, her eyes thoughtful. "You're Timeron's son?"

"Yes, but he died and I don't remember him."

"I see." She smiled a little, and he thought she looked tired. "We'll send a message today and see if we can't get you home soon."

Ilias nodded, but he knew it wouldn't be that simple. And he didn't want to be carted home like a stray goat. He wanted to prove himself, to show he could get home on his own. That was the point of this.

Menander didn't come until later that day, when the sun was just beginning to set.

Irissa had come in earlier, not long after Karima, and proved that she wasn't much like Ilias' notion of an older sister. She played games, and then they sat on the floor and she read to them out of a poet's story that Ilias had never heard before, a long story about a voyage down the coast, and fighting with Hisians. When she was done, Giliead said, "Read about the Chosen Vessels, 'Rissa."

"You've heard those stories," Irissa told him repressively, rolling up the parchment and tucking it carefully back into its leather case.

"Not all of them. And Ilias hasn't heard. And you can stop before the end."

"Stop before the end?" Ilias asked, poking Giliead in the ribs to make him squirm. "Why do you want her to do that?"

Giliead defended himself half-heartedly, laughing. "She doesn't like to read the parts where they die."

"They die? That's a lousy end," Ilias said, still tickling.

"Chosen Vessels always die," Giliead said, smiling. "That's what everybody says." Then Irissa threw a pillow at them and refused to read to them at all.

Menander came in not long after, his face shaved and his hair re-braided. He sat on the floor by the fire and told Giliead things to tell the god, and things to ask it. It was all fairly dull, just questions like "what does the sky look like" and "ask it which way the wind is blowing" and Ilias stopped listening, until they were done and Menander was getting up to leave. Then Irissa asked, "Why did the god help Giliead and not Livia?" Ilias had been wondering about that himself.

Menander shook his head, looking off toward the window and the field beyond, the shadows long as the sun set. "The gods, and especially this god, the god that Chose him, can see and hear Giliead very clearly now, better than we can see and hear each other in this room. It sees through his eyes, literally, and so it knew the wizard was here, where Giliead was, and it could get here in time to help him. As we get older, we lose that close contact. We can still speak to them, and they to us, but it takes time and effort." He turned back to them, ruffling Giliead's hair as the boy looked up at him solemnly. "The god didn't help Livia because it didn't know she was in danger until it was too late."

Impulsively, seeing this was the last time he might have the chance, Ilias asked, "Did the wizard do any other curses last night?"

Menander eyed him sharply, but Giliead turned to look at him, his expression serious. Giliead said, "There was only one other, besides what he did here in the house. He did one when he crossed the river from the Uplands, just a little one to keep the wagon ferry from seeing him—that's how Menander knew he was coming. He might have thought he was far enough away that the gods couldn't hear him, but they both did. Our god and the Uplands god. Then he killed Treian."

"Oh." Ilias subsided, leaning back against the pillows. "So the gods can hear it every time a wizard does a curse?"

Still watching him, Menander answered, "Some wizards are

more subtle, but this was a young one, and his curses were loud. He probably didn't realize how loud." He lifted a brow. "Why did you want to know?"

Ilias shifted uncomfortably. "Something happened last night...when I got lost. I thought I might have gotten lost because of a curse."

Menander nodded, understanding. "There was nothing like that."

Ilias nodded, resigned. He hadn't really thought so, anyway.

After another day, Menander returned to the Uplands, and Giliead was allowed to go outside the house again, though he chose to stay with Ilias, who was still confined to the atrium until his feet were well. Karima said nothing further about the message to the Finan, and Ilias found it easier to put it out of his head, pretending to himself that this was just a visit.

That was easy to do. Even with people from Andrien village wandering in and out, there was less confusion and turmoil in this house. Meals might be at odd times but there was always plenty of food, and it actually tasted good, even when visitors came at the last moment. Irissa seemed to actually enjoy her brother's company for the most part, and Karima and Ranior were...different.

By the third day Sabiras had pronounced Ilias' feet well enough to walk outside the house, as long as he wore a pair of sandals she found for him. He and Giliead had been helping her milk the goats, and were now sitting out on the short wall of the pen. From there, Ilias could see into the stable, and he noticed Ranior's horse was gone. "Where did Ranior go?" he asked.

Giliead frowned down at the dusty ground. "To your house."

Ilias sat bolt upright, staring. Giliead flicked a guilty look at him. "How do you know?" Ilias demanded.

Giliead bit his lip. "I heard them talking this morning, while you were still asleep."

"He's not back yet?"

"No."

If Ranior had left this morning... Ilias didn't think it was that far. "Come on." He pushed to his feet.

They sat out under the olive trees in the orchard, where they

could see the wagontrack down from the road. Every moment seemed to wear on Ilias' nerves, though Giliead fell asleep, curled up at the base of a gnarled trunk.

Finally he saw Ranior coming down the track, walking his horse. Something about the set of his shoulders told Ilias that Ranior was tired, though the distance to Finan and back couldn't have been that long. Giliead woke, blinking and rubbing his eyes. "He'll talk to mother first. Want to listen?"

Ilias nodded, not trusting himself to talk. Giliead scrambled up and led the way back through the orchard, then around to where the bulk of the house shielded them from the view of the barn and the front yard.

There was a field on this side of the house, with a shady stand of oaks, stretching away up to the beginning of the forested slope. There was a sheep pen out there, and some of the herdsmen were sitting on the stone fence talking. Giliead crept close to the wall of the house, Ilias following. The herdsmen were out in the bright sunlight and he and Giliead were in the shadow of the arbor; he didn't think the men would be able to see them.

They waited, crouching in the arbor, long enough for Ranior to take the mare to the barn and water her and wipe her down. Then, still in a crouch, Giliead moved through the sparse grass down the side of the house until he was under a broad window. He didn't have to gesture or glance back; Ilias could already hear Karima's and Ranior's voices. He settled next to Giliead, his shoulder against the cool stone, to listen.

"They wouldn't admit it, of course, but he was on the hill, all right," Ranior was saying. "I found his tracks, and the tracks of the horse that brought him, and a place where a child was digging in the dirt, playing. He must have been up there for most of the day, before he tried to find his way back."

"He knew, then." Karima's voice was quiet.

"Oh, he knew, all right. Maybe not at first. But he knew enough to lie when Menander asked him what he was doing out there." There was a pause and Ilias heard Ranior draw a long breath. "People are still leaving children there, as if the law means nothing. There were more bones than last time, but it was a bad harvest for some, and the fishing hasn't been good this year. Too many new babies that the families can't afford to feed. I did rites for as many as I could find, but I'll have to get Menander to go out there and

make sure there are no shades left behind."

Karima was silent for a long moment. "When they didn't respond to the message I sent, I was afraid of something like this, but..." Ranior must have nodded, because Karima continued angrily, "It's madness. There's a dozen families I can name off the top of my head who would take in a little boy his age with no more thought than they'd spare for taking in a stray lamb."

"Do you think the Keneans are right, that she killed Timeron? That she's always been mad?"

"No, no. But she was never the same after he died. And Ilias looks like him. As soon as I saw him, I thought he must be a Kenean. And I think she's had too many children, the fool. I know she went out of her head after that third girl was born and never managed to quite get back in. That can happen with too many births, so close together."

"What about the other husband, what's his excuse? He hasn't had too many births."

"Love for her, maybe. Fear she would send him away." Karima let her breath out, sounding angry. "I can't get over it."

"She braided his hair and put beads in it, then sent him out to die."

"There's a lot of people living in that house, a lot of other children. I don't think most of them knew where he was being taken." Ilias heard footsteps come toward the window. "And even if some of them did... She controls the purse-strings and her sister hasn't a goat to her name. If they argued too hard with her, they might find themselves out in the cold."

Ilias had heard enough. Numb, he eased away from the window, quiet and cautious by habit. When he was far enough away, he pushed to his feet and walked out from under the arbor. Giliead trailed along at his side, and the herdsmen glanced up at them, but away from the window they were just two boys walking in the afternoon sun.

In a little voice, Giliead asked, "What's the hill?"

Ilias took a deep breath. "It's where your family takes you when they want to get rid of you." It was the first time he had said it aloud.

Ilias avoided the front of the house, where someone might see him, heading toward the sparse forest at the base of the slope. There was a footpath here that was a short cut up the hill to the

road. There was nothing he needed to go back for. His own clothes had gone into the mending basket as too stained and ruined to wear again without being re-made. The brown shirt and blue pants, trimmed with leather braid and painted designs, were hand-me-downs Irissa had grown out of. The sandals had probably been hers too. The only thing he had that he had brought here with him were the beads in his hair, which Sabiras had braided back in after his bath. "You need to go back," he told Giliead.

Giliead kept pace with him. "What are you doing?"

"I have to go home." He had to know for certain.

Giliead caught the tail of his shirt. "I don't want you to go. I want you to stay here and be my brother."

Ilias yanked the shirt free, telling him sharply, "I've got a brother."

"The one that sent you away to die?"

Yes, that one. They were almost in the shadows of the trees, and Ilias gave him a shove, pushing him back toward the house. "Go on, go back. You're not allowed to leave the farm without a grown-up."

Giliead halted, watching him with tear-bright eyes. "You aren't either," he tried.

"I don't live here," Ilias told him, and started up the footpath.

It wasn't that long a walk. He knew now he had come down from the hills at an angle, confused in the dark, and had crossed the stream and hit the road a long distance out from where he should have. Finan was closer in towards Cineth than Andrien.

The road, which had been such a dark frightening cavern at night, was now just the road, dusty and uneven, shaded by the tall trees arching overhead. It got better as he walked further away from Andrien, smoother and less rocky the way he remembered.

The sun had only moved a little further when he passed the pathway turning off down toward the Greian land, and he knew he was very close. When he saw the familiar bend in the road, he began to run.

There was no one in the yard, no one around the pens or outbuildings, but his aunt's husbands and the older girls would be out with the herd. The house looked different, as though he had

never seen it from this angle, as though he had been gone years instead of only a few days. He slowed to a walk as he crossed the yard, thinking he saw movement at one of the windows. His heart was pounding, but it wasn't from fear.

The door, heavy wood speckled with old paint, stood shut when it should be open to keep the front rooms from growing stuffy. He stepped up onto the stone porch and used his fist to pound on the door.

It opened abruptly and Niale stood there. His older sister had their mother's darker chestnut hair and olive skin, but her nose was sharp and her eyes too narrow. She was dressed in a rich purple robe, the sleeves tied back to bare her arms. "What are you doing here?" she demanded.

Her voice was hard and cold but her cheeks were flushed and he knew she had seen him come up the path; she must have been standing on top of the door to open it so quickly. And he still wasn't afraid. "I live here," he told her.

She tried to stare him down, her favorite trick, but her eyes slipped away from his after only a heartbeat. She stared over his left shoulder, saying, "You ran away. Don't expect to just come back here."

She didn't add anything like "we were worried to death" or "everyone was so upset" or "we searched all night" and that made it sound even more like the lie it was. In a way, it told Ilias all he needed to know. "I didn't run away. I know you know that." Her face stiffened but before she could reply, he added, "I didn't tell anybody."

For a moment she was flustered. He took a step forward, looking up at her. "I won't tell anybody, ever. Just let me come back."

Her expression hardened then, and she said with grim finality, "You ran away, you abandoned your family—"

"That's not true!" he shouted. It was the word *abandoned* that took his temper. "You know it's not true!"

Her face twisted for an instant and she flicked a look at someone standing inside the foyer, out of his sight. Stepping back with a grimace, she said, "Ilias, just go away!" and slammed the door.

He stood there a moment, breathing hard, then turned away, stepping down off the porch, scuffing his sandals in the dirt. His face felt hot and his head ached, as if he had been crying for hours,

but his eyes were dry. Then he saw a man on a horse trotting down the wagon path. It was Ranior, riding the yellow mare from the Andrien stables. Someone must have noticed Ilias was missing and had managed to get Giliead to tell where he had gone. Ilias knew Giliead had only told because he had wanted to. Even at his age, instinct told Ilias that Giliead would be nearly impossible to break with only parental pressure.

Ranior reined in nearby. He looked down at Ilias, his face regretful, saying, "Ilias, come away from there. It's not going to do any good."

Ilias had the impulse to run. Not because he was afraid of Ranior, but because it would mean giving up. But the horse recognized him and stretched out a velvet nose. After a moment, Ilias stepped toward him.

He started to reach up to take Ranior's hand, then memory of the last time he had done this stopped him. "We're going back to Andrien?" he asked, watching Ranior's face. He had heard Ranior and Karima's opinion of people who abandoned children, but he wanted to make certain. He didn't know the words to put it into yet, but he knew unthinking trust was a thing of the past.

"Yes, we're going back to Andrien," Ranior said it without impatience, meeting his eyes, as if he knew exactly what had passed through Ilias' thoughts.

Ilias reached for his hand, gripping his wrist as Ranior pulled him up onto the horse.

"I don't understand," Ilias said, looking at the house one last time.

Ranior let his breath out, shaking his head. "To tell you the truth, I'm not sure I do either. But... If they take you back, they have to admit what happened. They have to admit that they let it happen."

Ilias didn't understand that, didn't want to understand it. "Can't they just pretend it didn't happen?" he said, feeling small and stupid again.

"No, they can't do that." Ranior lifted the reins, turning the horse back toward the road. "Come on, or we'll miss dinner."

It was still a long time before Ilias called Andrien home.

end

Rites of Passage

Ilias, Giliead, and their older sister Irissa walked down the waterfront of Cineth's harbor. It was a busy place, with men hauling casks of water and big dusty red amphorae of olive oil and wine, and traders hawking their wares. The sun was bright and the breeze cool, and Ilias was enjoying the day, despite the fact that Giliead was trying very hard to start a fight with Irissa.

"When are you going to buy a husband?" Giliead asked her, apparently determined to be as obnoxious as possible. "After this harvest, you could have anybody in town."

Irissa snorted derisively. "I don't want anybody in town."

Ilias had heard her say this before, and was just as glad to hear it again. He said, "You should wait to marry somebody for love, like Karima did." Karima was Giliead and Irissa's mother. She was younger than their father Ranior, and had been wealthy enough to take her pick of husbands, but it was obvious she had chosen with her heart.

Giliead kicked at a piling, determined not to be deterred from the argument. "Irissa never talks to anybody, how will she know if she's in love or not?"

Ilias gave him a sour look, but he knew why Giliead was in such a bad mood. They had just heard in the market plaza that Menander, the Chosen Vessel for the Uplands, had left on a hunt, heading up into the eastern hills to follow a rumor of a curseling seen near one of the isolated villages. Again, Giliead had been left behind.

Giliead was the Chosen Vessel for Cineth, gifted at birth by the god that watched over the city; the gift gave him the ability to smell curses and see the traces they left in air, earth, and water. But he was nearly seventeen seasons old now, and he had never yet been on a wizard hunt. Menander, much older and far more experienced than Giliead, should have been letting him help protect both Cineth's territory and the Uplands. The god of each area guarded

its territory as well as it could, but wizards and their curselings were adept at slipping through the boundaries to do as much damage as possible, and it was the Vessels who had to stop them. But so far, all Menander's teaching had been theoretical. Now that Giliead was older, it was beginning to chafe.

"I'd rather buy a galley than a husband," Irissa said, eyeing the row of ships. Most of those docked along here were fishermen or merchants with one or two sails, the canvas every shade of purple, red, blue, and other lucky colors, with the stylized eyes painted on their bows so the ships could find their way home. "Maybe we could try trading with the Chaens."

Ilias grinned at her. "You just want an excuse to travel." He hadn't been around the farm during the past winter season much himself; he had been working at hauling cargo, staying overnight in the city with Andrien relatives. This season he had made enough extra money to buy copper earrings for himself and a second set as a gift for Giliead, and a matching armlet for Irissa.

"What's wrong with wanting to travel?" Irissa waved toward the ships. "Mother and father can take care of our land. There's plenty of time before I have to worry about it."

Ilias knew that Irissa didn't have many real friends except for them, and the people of Andrien village. There weren't any single men her own age she had much to do with. Thinking of some of the spectacular mistakes he had seen other women their age make in the husband-choosing area, he said, "Waiting to pick the right person is better."

Irissa evidently appreciated the support. "That's right." She flung her arms in the air in frustration. "I should just marry Ilias. Save us all a lot of trouble."

Over the past season or so, Ilias had been privately thinking that that would be a wonderful idea, but the fact that Irissa had brought it up, even as a joke, struck him so much that he couldn't reply. He had lived at Andrien House with them for more than ten seasons, but he wasn't Giliead and Irissa's brother by blood. It was apparent from their looks; Ilias was inland Syprian, short, stocky, and blond, and Giliead and Irissa were both olive-skinned, with straight chestnut hair. Giliead was a couple of seasons the younger but he was already taller than both Ilias and Irissa, broad-shouldered and strong.

Unimpressed, Giliead said, "It would be cheaper. And after that

thing with the trader's daughter, mother will be lucky to get more than three chickens and a diseased goat for him—Ow!"

He made a retaliatory grab for Ilias, who had punched him in the back. To forestall further violence, Irissa slung an arm around Ilias' neck, throwing her weight on him to make him stagger out of reach.

Instead of pursuing them both, Giliead turned away and shaded his eyes to look out over the harbor. Ilias followed his gaze, trying to see what was so interesting. There was only one ship coming in, a merchant with black and white square designs painted on the hull and a single red sail. A dark-clothed man holding the tiller shouted orders as others scrambled to take in sails. "Hisian," Giliead said, as if he wasn't aware he had spoken aloud.

Ilias had spotted the bare prow too. Hisian ships never had eyes, so they were just dead soulless wood, like a raft or a dinghy. It was stupid to put to sea on a ship like that, especially for the long distance down the coast from the nearest Hisian port. Still leaning comfortably on Irissa, he said, "Let's watch the Portmaster search her."

Irissa nodded, but added, "I bet they didn't bring any women. They aren't that stupid anymore."

Hisians treated their women like slaves or worse, so Syprians rescued them whenever possible. There were several women who had been Hisian living in Cineth now, known by their skin, which was the color of bleached parchment, and the tribal scarring on cheeks and forehead. The woman who ran one of the smaller provisioners on the harbor front had been a Hisian once.

They started down toward the stone piers, where the ship was being awkwardly brought into dock. Someone else must have shared Giliead's suspicious interest in the newcomer; Ilias saw a patrol galley appear at the mouth of the harbor, the three rows of oars working as it followed the Hisian in.

They reached the slip as the ship was still tying off. Giliead and Irissa's father Ranior was there, waiting with the Portmaster Hadria, an older woman with gray woven through her dark hair. The men who would search the ship for her stood around by the pilings, speculating on what they would find.

When Hadria went to talk to a cargo factor, Giliead asked Ranior, "Will the Hisians agree to the search?"

Ranior nodded. "Hadria said they seem to be reasonable." He

glanced at Giliead, his smile turning concerned. Ranior was tall and olive-skinned like Giliead, his red-brown hair almost all gray now, though he still wore it long like a younger man. "Why? What's wrong?"

His eyes still on the ship, Giliead shook his head, his face a little bewildered. "I don't know. It just gives me a strange feeling."

Ilias tried to see what Giliead saw. "You mean a strange feeling like it's a trick to get into the harbor, or a strange feeling like something...else?" He found himself not wanting to say "cursed" aloud.

"I don't know," Giliead said again, sounding annoyed now. "It's not a curse, not on the ship. That I'd be able to see. Or I should be able to see it." He shrugged, almost angrily. "I can't tell if this is a real feeling or I'm just imagining it."

"Maybe Gil should go aboard." Irissa looked at Ranior hopefully. Ilias was fairly sure that meant that Irissa thought she should go aboard and that Giliead would be a good excuse, but he couldn't blame her; he wanted to see the foreign ship too.

But Ranior's expression was serious. "I'll talk to Hadria." He added, still watching Giliead, "Don't say what you're looking for, don't even imply it, not with a look, not with a word. Not unless you're certain."

Giliead hesitated, a flicker of unease crossing his face, then he nodded. "I understand."

Hadria agreed to let them go aboard with the searchers, probably thinking Ranior wanted to see the ship for himself. But once Ilias stood with Irissa on the deck, he admitted to some disappointment. The ship was just an ordinary merchant, her shallow hull stuffed with bales of fur, some millstones, and other goods. There was no cabin on the deck for shelter, just a section of tarp to rig up as protection from the sun. The small crew were mostly young boys, and the dark-clothed shipmaster was a lean old man, his tribal scars so puckered from age and weather they were nearly impossible to read. He stood beside the mast, weary and resigned, and the young crew mostly huddled nervously near the water casks. They all wore dark colors, as Hisians usually did, and had already stripped to the waist to prove they weren't trying to conceal any female captives. They looked like what they said they were; a family of merchant Hisians coming along the coast to trade for wine and olive oil.

His expression of mild interest fixed, Giliead wandered around the deck as the Portmaster's assistants climbed through the cargo. The Hisians barely noticed him, and were more occupied with trying desperately not to look at Irissa. They treated their own women like dirt and then killed each other for looking at them; they seemed slow to get the idea that with Syprians, it was all right to look, just not to be rude about it.

The youngest, scrawniest boy snuck a glance at Irissa, then accidentally made eye contact with Ilias. He twitched and hunkered down closer to the deck in terror. Ilias was highly conscious of the need to keep from betraying the fact that Giliead was looking for curses, and in trying to keep his face blank, he felt he probably looked far more forbidding than he meant to. He tried to relax, telling Irissa in a low voice, "Doesn't look like anything's wrong."

"No," she agreed reluctantly. "Gil needs to go with Menander, to get some real experience." Frustrated, she added, "Sometimes it doesn't seem as if Menander remembers that Gil is a Chosen Vessel at all."

Ilias knew reading the Journals and listening to Menander's stories was all well and good, but Giliead needed to work with a real Vessel, to see a hunt for himself, and to help with it. Yet now he found himself wanting to argue with Irissa that Menander was right, that putting it off was best. "Some Vessels just travel alone."

Irissa pointed out bluntly, "Yes. Usually the ones who die quickly."

Ilias didn't have an answer for that. The Journals had shown it over and over again, that Chosen Vessels who hunted alone tended to come to their ends far more quickly than those who didn't. Though it was risky either way, and usually the companions died faster than the Vessels. Ilias had meant to be Giliead's companion as long as he could remember, but with Menander putting off Giliead's training, it had been easy to pretend it was never going to happen, that their lives would be normal.

He looked away, even more uncomfortable now. Something in Ranior's face when he had told Giliead not to even hint that the ship might be cursed had made Ilias uneasy. That Giliead might be wrong and innocent people die, or be given curse marks and ostracized.

Chosen Vessels were supposed to prevent that, it was the whole

point of having them. Hisians didn't have Vessels, and accused each other of being wizards constantly, and killed each other like animals.

In the Poets' stories, it all seemed so simple. Except Ilias already knew nothing was simple.

"Harbormaster, I hope there's no trouble," someone said, and Ilias looked up to see a man he had taken as part of the crew addressing Hadria. "I've been on the ship since Ancyra, and these are good people." He was young, with a tangle of dark hair cut at the shoulders. Under the coating of sweat and grime, he wasn't as pale as the other Hisians, but he was dressed like them with a black wrap around his waist. Ilias squinted at him, trying to decide if he was Syprian or not. It was hard to tell, but his Syrnaic had an inland accent and he had spoken to Hadria first. The Hisian shipmaster had kept trying to talk to Ranior, who had just eyed him silently until the man forced himself to speak to Hadria.

"Are you a trader?" Hadria asked him.

He smiled, answering the question she hadn't asked. "My name is Delphian, from Syrnych. I'm a poet."

The arrival of a new poet was an event, especially one from Syrnych, which was the largest city-state in the Syrnaic and the home of the matriarch who ruled over the loose confederation of cities. Halian, who was currently lawgiver with his wife Erinni, had invited Delphian to perform the next night. Ranior was a friend of Halian's and so the Andrien family got an invitation to the lawgiver's house to watch.

Despite Giliead's position, and Ranior's former status as lawgiver, the Andriens didn't usually see much of the more prominent families in the city. Ilias knew them by sight, the way most people in Cineth knew each other by sight, but Karima had always preferred the company of people from Andrien village, or her friends and relations from nearby farms. Ranior had a large acquaintance from all through Cineth's society, but most were as eccentric as he was. When Giliead had been Chosen by the god, it had isolated the Andrien family to some extent; people were afraid of wizards and curses, and some of that fear carried over to those who fought wizards and curses.

They reached the plaza before sunset and entered the lawgiver's house, finding the lamps already lit along the broad portico that framed the atrium. A dozen or so dining sets, low tables surrounded by cushioned benches, had been set out under the portico. Ilias had been a little nervous at the idea of going to a formal dinner at the lawgiver's house, though he would rather have died than admit it. He was a ward of Andrien, but his birth family, the Finan, were much further down on the social scale. But Erinni's large family was already there, along with a few of the more important heads of household in the city and their husbands and families. They all stood around talking and laughing, and children played among the tables, and he didn't feel unpleasantly conspicuous.

Karima had made them all wear their good clothes, and Ilias thought that Irissa looked the best. She wore a dark blue dress and a purple stole with gold painted designs, and a necklace of braided leather and silver beads, with polished bluestones.

Oblivious to his sister's beauty, Giliead commented, "The food smells good."

"We could get the same at home," Irissa said, her tone bored. "Better, in fact. Ignias has the best recipe for duck sauce I've ever —"

Giliead eyed her in annoyance. "Could you just enjoy yourself for once?"

Irissa's lips thinned. "We're not here to enjoy ourselves. Mother wants us here so I can look for a worthless husband and so women with more money than the merchants and cargo-haulers can get a look at Ilias."

Frustrated, Ilias contemplated the darkening sky. To hear them talk you would think he was the biggest slut in Cineth. But one thing everyone was right about was that he had honed his flirting abilities over the past season. He hadn't tried applying them to Irissa, but maybe that had been a mistake. He gave her a half-smile. "I thought you were going to marry me."

Irissa tried an aloof stare, but couldn't keep her face straight and started to smile. Giliead then ruined it by saying, "When you say 'mother' do you actually mean our mother? Because I don't know what house you've been living in but—"

Irissa turned to him impatiently. "Well, you're a lost cause, since Chosen Vessels don't marry."

"I didn't realize you were the Chosen Vessel," someone said. It was the new poet Delphian. Dressed in a dark red shirt and dyed leather, his hair braided and clean, he looked more like a traveling Syprian poet and less like a Hisian seaman. He had been given a room in the lawgiver's guesthouse, and Erinni must have paid for his new clothes as part of the reward for his performance. Delphian carried a battered leather case slung over one shoulder, and Ilias remembered he had had it on the Hisian ship; it looked incongruous now next to his good clothes.

Giliead regarded him uncomfortably. "Yes, I'm the Chosen Vessel."

Delphian didn't seem to take Giliead's reticence for rudeness. "What poet did you choose to tell your stories? Perhaps it's someone I know."

"I haven't chosen a poet yet." Giliead looked away, still distant, though the cause was more obvious now. "I haven't killed any wizards, so there aren't any stories to tell."

Delphian smiled, shrugging it off as no consequence. "You're young yet."

Giliead's mouth tightened. "I'm older than I look."

Ilias knew there was no good way out of this conversation. Hoping to change the subject, he asked Delphian, "Have you told stories for other Chosen Vessels?"

"Once, for a Vessel called Lydae, from the Bistrai Island." Delphian's lips twisted as he tried to suppress a wince. "She was killed, and I told that story."

Ilias willed his expression to stay noncommittal. It was like praising water over the bodies of the drowned, but Ilias supposed there were few others Delphian could talk to who might understand. Everybody seemed to know Chosen Vessels died often; few of them seemed to realize that Chosen Vessels had families and friends. Irissa didn't react either, and just said, "The Bistrai Island, is that where you come from? You're a long way from home."

"I was born there, but I've been living in Syrneth."

"How did Lydae die?" Giliead asked, watching him sharply.

Delphian hesitated, looking as if he wished he hadn't spoken. "On her first hunt." He gave Ilias and Irissa an apologetic look. "Excuse me, I think Erinni needs to speak with me."

As he walked away, Irissa took a deep breath. "I hope no one asks for that story."

"That would be all we need," Ilias agreed, his jaw set. "Then people could come right out and say 'why isn't your brother dead yet?'"

Irissa frowned at him. "I don't think he meant that."

"He didn't mean it, but..." Ilias shrugged, giving in. He didn't know what he was trying to say.

The dinner was uneventful, and afterward Delphian stood to speak. Everyone moved to arrange themselves in more comfortable positions on the couches, or put cushions down on the tile floor to sit on. Ilias, Giliead, and Irissa went to sprawl on the grass in the atrium with some of the children and other young people, though they sat at a distance from the others.

The battered case Delphian carried was explained when he opened it, drew out a cloth-swaddled object, and carefully unwrapped it to reveal a panpipe. The pipes gleamed white, and seemed finely carved, and he obviously prized it. Ilias heard Giliead groan faintly, and grinned to himself. Old-style poets tended to accompany themselves with an instrument, which Giliead thought was dead boring. Ilias didn't mind it, though he did prefer Bythia's unaccompanied style.

The story Delphian told turned out to be an old one, about the Isle of Storms just off the coast. The island was far enough out to sea to be out of the god's reach, and it had been wizard-haunted off and on for ages. Their curses had trapped mist and clouds around it, to make it easier to draw ships to ruin, and even though the wizards who had done that were long dead, the clouds lingered. But what had always caught Ilias' imagination were the stories of how there had been a great city there once, built inside the rock of the island itself and under the sea around it.

When the poem was done, and the rest of the audience called out appreciation and approval, Ilias rolled over on his side to regard Giliead and Irissa. Giliead sprawled face down, pretending to be unconscious. Irissa hadn't gone quite that far, but she didn't look rapt with enthusiasm either.

Ilias said, "He wasn't very good, was he?"

Irissa nodded absently. "I thought he spoke well enough, but something was lacking."

Giliead lifted his head. "I would rather have heard Bythia." He looked around, his expression sour. "But everyone else seemed to enjoy it."

The rest of the guests were getting up, milling around, talking, and the servers were bringing out warmed wine.

"Let's go." Irissa pushed to her feet, suddenly impatient.

"Where's mother?"

Ilias suspected Irissa wanted to avoid attention from the young men of good families now wandering around the atrium. That was fine with him. "I'll go look."

He made his way through the crowd on the portico, dodging cushions and tables, slipping between people. Everyone was talking about Delphian's performance, as if it had been the best poem they had ever heard; Ilias thought they must have had too much wine. He saw Erinni, still sitting at her couch, with some of the other heads of families, but Karima wasn't there. He ducked into the indoor dining room, finding it empty except for a couple of children playing on the floor, then went through the interior door to the receiving room.

The curtains that closed it off from the open portico were partly drawn, but a couple of oil lamps were lit, and it was enough light to see Ranior standing with Delphian. Ranior's shoulders were tense, and he held Delphian's panpipe as if examining the workmanship, but from his face his mind wasn't on it. *He's angry*, Ilias thought. Delphian's expression was placating; maybe he had asked for a favor, for Ranior to speak to Halian or Erinni. People sometimes sought Ranior out for that, and it never pleased him.

"I'll take my leave," Delphian said, with a gracious nod, "I should speak to the other guests." He took the panpipe back and turned for the doorway, pushing the curtain aside to step out onto the portico.

Ilias went to Ranior's side, but Ranior still stared after Delphian. Ilias asked, "Did he want something?"

Ranior blinked, then smiled in a preoccupied way. He patted Ilias absently on the shoulder. "It was nothing. Go on."

It took Ilias longer to get back, because he got roped into moving the tables off the portico to make room for the dancing. Once he escaped that and reached the atrium again, Karima was already there, standing aside with Irissa.

Giliead stood a few paces away, arms folded, and from everyone's expressions it was clear there was an argument in progress. Ilias moved to Giliead's side in time to hear Karima say in exasperation, "Of course you don't have to choose one tonight, but you need to get to know these boys."

Irisa gritted her teeth. "I already know them."

"You don't. You've hardly spoken to any of them since last summer." Karima sighed. "Irisa, I'm not asking you to do anything you don't want. But an alliance with a town family would help us, it would help Erinni and Halian, it would help every other family we're allied with. I'm just asking you not to disregard all these boys just because of how they behaved as children."

Irisa seemed unaffected, but the words hit Ilias hard. He hadn't seriously thought he had much chance of becoming Irisa's first husband, but... Maybe he had taken it more seriously than he had realized. *You were stupid to get your hopes up*, he told himself. If Irisa married him, it wouldn't cost the family anything, but it wouldn't bring them anything, either. No new alliance with another family, no interest in anyone else's farming or trading concerns. It would be a waste of both of them. And his prospects, as a ward of the family and not a real son of the house, weren't nearly as good as Irisa's.

"That's one thing I don't have to worry about," Giliead muttered, sounding bitterly pleased about it.

"Lucky you," Ilias said, bitter but not pleased. He needed some time, or he was just going to say things he would regret later. "I'm going down to the docks, see if I can find Macritus. I'll go back with them."

"What? Are you sure—" Giliead called after him, but Ilias was already heading for the door.

Ilias ended up riding back to Andrien in a wagon with Macritus and Selias, who had been in town buying supplies for both Andrien village and the house. The two men had sampled too much of the wine part of their cargo with the merchants, and were now moving more slowly than usual and were glad of the extra help. Macritus had lost the lower part of his arm in a long ago battle, before Ilias had even come to Andrien, so once they arrived at the village Ilias stayed to help them unload. By that time it was late into the night, and they all three agreed that no one at Andrien House would be pleased to be woken to take in amphorae that could be just as easily delivered the next morning. Ilias ended up on a pallet on Macritus' porch, lulled to sleep by the sound of the sea.

Ilias woke to a gray cloudy dawn and a sharp salty wind off the water. Standing up to yawn and stretch, he looked down the hill toward the fishing beach, between the houses and huts. The breakers rushed up the sand, white-capped and rough. The sky threatened rain, and it was obviously not going to be a good fishing day. It didn't make him feel any less depressed, but he thought he could at least keep his problems to himself now.

Ilias smelled porridge cooking and decided to go up to Andrien House for breakfast before he got to work.

He borrowed the blanket he had slept in, wrapping it around his shoulders as he started the walk up the hill path. He followed it up through the stands of trees, then to the more level ground of the orchards and pastures, through the large vegetable garden and across to the house.

The farmyard was quiet under the gray sky, the big flat-roofed two-story stone house not showing much sign of life. Ilias heard someone moving around in the cowshed as he passed it, but didn't stop to see who it was. He went up the steps and through the open front door, through the painted foyer and into the atrium, heading toward Giliead's room to see if he was awake yet. Ilias needed a bath and a change of clothes, but he thought he might as well put that off until they had finished moving the amphorae.

Then Ranior stepped out of the doorway into the receiving room. He demanded sharply, "Where have you been?"

Ilias stopped short, startled. "I was down at the village, with Macritus—"

Ranior's shirt was rumpled and some of his braids were coming undone, as if he had dressed in a hurry, as if he had barely slept. "Don't lie to me."

Ilias stared, felt his jaw drop. "I'm not— Why would you think —"

"Where's Irissa?" Ranior took a step forward.

"I don't know, she didn't come back with us. I thought she was here." Ilias' heart started to pound. If something had happened to her... "Is she missing?"

But Ranior just stared at him as if Ilias was an enemy, was someone he hated. Ranior said, "I know you've been sleeping with her."

It was as shocking as a slap to the face. Ilias fell back a step. "No! No, Ranior, I haven't." Guilt made him flush hot then cold.

He had been thinking about it all the time, they just hadn't done it. *How could he know that?* Ilias must have been looking at her too much. He lived with her, how could he not look at her? And they flirted, it was innocent... It wasn't innocent, but it wasn't anything else, either. He stepped forward. "I swear—"

The back-handed blow knocked him sideways. It was so fast, so unexpected, Ilias didn't know he had been struck until his shoulder hit the floor.

Ranior loomed over him, shouting, "Don't lie to me, you useless little motherless bastard! We should never have taken you in, after your own people threw you away. Your mother's mad, do you think we'd let you breed with our heir?"

"Ranior!" Giliead stood in the doorway to the dining room, shocked and incredulous. "What is..." Then his face changed, his expression turned horrified.

Ranior rounded on him. His voice low and even, he said, "You stay out of this."

Giliead took a step forward. "Ranior, listen to me—"

Ranior strode toward him, and the sudden punch he threw caught Giliead in the chin. Giliead staggered backward as Ranior hit him again, then he fell over the little table.

Ilias shoved to his feet, sick with horror. "No, stop! He didn't do anything, it's me!"

Ranior turned, grabbed up the iron brazier from the floor, scattering ash and dead coals. "Get out, now."

Ilias stumbled, then bolted for the front door. He made it through the foyer and to the front portico before Ranior caught the back of his shirt. Ilias jerked sideways to free himself but his foot caught the edge of the first step and he sprawled face-first on the dusty ground below the porch. Breathing hard, he rolled over. Ranior stood over him and lifted the brazier.

Then Irissa leapt on him from behind and sent him staggering forward. Ranior dropped the brazier as she wound strong arms around his neck.

Ilias struggled to his feet. His first impulse was to run, but Irissa shouted for help, her clear voice ringing out over the yard, and he couldn't leave her. He felt hollow, numb, he couldn't make himself think.

Ranior grabbed Irissa's arms and dragged her off, and tossed her away as if she was a rag doll. She hit the ground and rolled, as

Ranior turned back to Ilias. Then Giliead slammed out of the house and leapt off the porch to tackle Ranior to the ground.

Ilias went to Irissa, grabbed her arm to pull her to her feet. He still wanted to run, and he had no idea what to do. Then Irissa clutched his arm, and he realized Ranior wasn't moving.

Giliead shoved himself up and pushed Ranior onto his back. Ranior was limp, his eyes rolled back in his head.

A crash sounded across the yard and Ilias looked up. Macritus and Cylides had just dropped a two-wheeled handcart of amphorae and were running toward them. Confused herdsmen were coming out of the shed.

Then Karima appeared in the doorway of the house, staring in incomprehension. She still wore a bed robe and her hair was down. Sabiras and some of the kitchen workers appeared behind her. After a shocked moment, Karima flung herself forward and dropped to her knees beside Ranior. Giliead pushed to his feet to give her room. She cupped Ranior's face, bewildered. "What happened?"

Ilias shook his head. He wanted to run away, to lie, go somewhere and pretend this had never happened, that he hadn't been here. The side of his face was starting to throb from that first blow, proving that the whole nightmarish moment had been all too real. He said, "Giliead didn't— It was an accident."

Irissa began, "There's something wrong with him, he's ill, it's—"

"It's a curse." Giliead's voice was flat, but it silenced everyone.

Leaning over Ranior, Karima froze. She stared up at Giliead. "No. Giliead—"

Ilias couldn't speak. *Cursed*. The word burned the shock away into sick horror. There were murmurs from the others, in dread and disbelief.

Giliead's gaze was on Karima. "I can see it. The air around him is..." His voice hardened. "I can see it."

Sabiras came down the steps, shaking her head helplessly. "But how could this happen..."

"Send for Menander," Karima snapped. "And someone help me."

Macritus jerked his head at two of the herdsmen, and they bolted for the barn to get the horses. *Menander is on a hunt*, Ilias remembered, trying to make his brain work again. The men would have to ride to Cineth, then Halian would have to send a courier to the Uplands. If Menander was on the track of a curseling, he would

have to finish it off before he could come to Cineth.

Cylides stepped forward first and leaned down to help Karima lift Ranior. Cylides had a curse-mark branded into his cheek, from something that had happened years ago, Ilias had never known what. It meant he had been touched by a curse and survived, and marked forever. Ranior had given him shelter in Andrien village, when the rest of Cineth had ostracized him. Giliead leaned down to take Ranior's feet and Ilias realized he should be helping, that the others might be afraid to touch Ranior now. But then Gamias, the chief herdsman, moved forward to help and Ilias ended up just following as they carried Ranior into the house.

They took him to the atrium's portico and put him on the couch there. Sabiras hurried to get water and a blanket, and Karima sat next to Ranior, brushing the hair off his forehead. Her voice tightly controlled, she said, "Giliead, are you certain?"

Ilias thought, *Maybe he's wrong, maybe he just wants him to be cursed, so it would explain—* But with absolute conviction, Giliead said, "Yes."

"How did this happen?" Irissa sounded ill. She hugged herself, and Ilias realized she was shivering. "How could Ranior be cursed? He was fine on the way back home last night."

Giliead told her, "It has to be something that took time to work on him. If it had been something immediate, the god would have heard it and told me." He turned back to Karima. His voice was firm, his face hard, no doubt, no hesitation. "It was something that came on the Hisian ship. There was something about it, I couldn't tell what it was."

Karima's face was drawn, but she watched Giliead intently. "Then you think it's Delphian."

Giliead nodded. "None of the other Hisians came further into town than the port."

Macritus protested, "Dozens of strangers, travelers and traders, have passed through the city in the last few days—"

"And Delphian hasn't been out here," Irissa said, baffled. "Ranior never spoke to Delphian alone."

"But he did," Ilias said, startled to realize it. "At the lawgiver's house, after Delphian performed the poem."

Giliead focused on him. He asked sharply, "You saw this? When?"

"When I was looking for Karima. I found Ranior in the receiving

room, talking to Delphian."

Everyone else stared, trying to understand. Frowning, Sabiras said, "That's not much to go on, is it? It could be innocent."

"Was it innocent, Ilias?" Giliead's gaze seemed to hold Ilias frozen. "What was the first thing you thought when you saw them? Not the second, not the third, but the first?"

Ilias wet his lips. Part of him didn't believe it was a curse, part of him was certain this was all his fault, that he had driven Ranior to this... He tried to force that aside, to be objective, the way the Chosen Vessels' Journals instructed. "I thought Delphian wanted something from him. A favor, something. They weren't just talking. I thought Ranior was annoyed at him. But then Delphian took the panpipe back and went away—"

Giliead said, "Ranior was holding the panpipe?"

"Yes." The others stirred uneasily. Everyone knew that curses could be left on objects, passing the curse to anyone who touched them. It was one of the ways that wizards slipped curses past a god's boundaries. Ilias felt his heart sink. "That's it, then. That was how he did it?"

Giliead let his breath out. "I'll have to see the panpipe to be sure. The curse wasn't showing on it last night, but... Now that it's been used on someone, it might be visible."

Karima touched Ranior's hand. Ilias hadn't thought she could look any worse, but her face might have been etched in stone. She looked like she was dying.

His voice thick, Macritus said, "Delphian can't be a wizard. Surely the god would have known."

"Not if Delphian was careful," Giliead said, still certain. "There are ways to make the curses almost silent. Something like this, carried on the panpipe, that didn't work until later..."

"You can't accuse him in front of others, even if—" Cylides said, sounding desperate. Cylides knew better than anyone just how serious an accusation like this was. "If you're wrong—"

"I won't accuse him, I'll bring the god to him," Giliead said quietly. "If it's not him, he'll come to no harm."

Cylides nodded, reassured. It was only sense, and it quieted all objections.

Irisa said, "We'll go now," and no one argued with her.

As they walked toward the waiting horses, Giliead said, "It was a curse, Ilias. It made him say things that weren't true."

"I know it was a curse," Ilias said. His heart was like a lump of ice in his chest. Giliead didn't know what the curse had really done. The only thing they knew for certain was that it had made Ranior sick and angry.

"If it's not Delphian—" Irissa started to say.

"It's him," Giliead said.

But when they reached Cineth, Delphian had already fled.

While Macritus and the others waited outside, they met Halian and Erinni in the lawgiver's house. The sudden arrival of the Chosen Vessel, with Ilias, Irissa, Macritus and two other men from the farm, plus Erinni's orders to search the city for Delphian, meant that suspicions were already spreading, despite Giliead's best intentions. The Hisian ship had left early that morning, despite the bad weather, and Halian had sent a patrol galley after it. It didn't seem likely that Delphian had been aboard, but they would have to bring the Hisians back to make certain they hadn't been cursed too.

People started to gather worriedly in the plaza. There had been no mistake; Giliead had looked at the room Delphian had used in the lawgiver's guest quarters, and seen curse trails, invisible to anyone but a Chosen Vessel.

"Something must have changed, he's leaving traces now. It means whatever curse he's carrying is stronger," Giliead had told them, and backed them out of the room.

Now the men and women who had been sent to search the city were coming back with reports, and Halian told Giliead grimly, "He borrowed a horse from Belia's stable, before dawn, and told her he was going to visit a farmstead down the coastal road."

Erinni came back from the portico, wrapping a shawl around her shoulders. "We've sent riders after Menander, but it'll take some time to find him. He must be nearly to the eastern hills by now."

Giliead nodded. An ugly bruise marked his jaw where Ranior's fist had landed. Ilias' jaw and cheekbone ached, a counterpoint to the stiffness in his shoulder and back. Giliead said, "When Menander gets here, send him after me. He'll be able to follow the trail."

Halian frowned. "After you? What do you mean?"

"I have to follow Delphian now." Giliead's voice hardened. "I

have to catch him before he does this to someone else."

"I'm going with you," Ilias said. It sounded as if he meant to be heroic, but he knew it was more for his benefit than Giliead's. Ilias thought if he stayed behind, not knowing what was happening, it would kill him. Just knowing Delphian was out there, free, was near to killing him now.

"So am I," Irissa added. Giliead took a sharp breath, and she cut him off, sharp and bitter, "He's my father. It's my right."

There was one thing Ilias was certain about. "Gil, it's your first time, you shouldn't go alone."

"If you try, we'll just follow you." Irissa made it sound grimly final.

Giliead's expression was an odd combination of guilt, anger, and relief. *He doesn't want to go alone*, Ilias thought, *he wants us with him*, and somehow that eased some of the pain. Halian and Erinni both spoke at once, trying to object.

Then Ilias heard hoof beats in the street, and Cylides' voice called out, "Gil, Irissa, are you in there?"

Irissa froze, staring toward the doorway. Ilias met Giliead's gaze. Cylides never came into town. Because of the curse-mark, people here didn't speak to him, barely acknowledged his existence. Karima would never send him as a messenger unless it was urgent.

Then Irissa pushed past them and ran out into the street, and they hurried after her.

Outside, Cylides was just swinging down off a horse, a mare from the Andrien stable. The crowd had backed away from him, but was still lingering close enough to listen. His face was covered with dust from the road, and streaked with tears. Irissa stopped in front of him, and said, almost calmly, "Ranior died."

"Yes." Cylides took a breath, looked from her to Giliead, then to Ilias. "Not long after you left. He never woke. It was quiet."

Irissa's jaw set, and she blinked once, then controlled it. She turned to Giliead, hard as stone. "We're going with you. You can't stop us."

Giliead said, quietly, "I won't try to stop you."

Giliead picked up Delphian's curse traces at the stable where he had

borrowed a horse, and saw that they led out of the city toward the hills, not the coastal road. They rode all day, and camped that night high in the hills, pushing themselves and the horses until it was too dark to travel. They found a spot sheltered by trees and a big rock, and built a small fire. Macritus and Cylides had offered to come with them, but Giliead had sent them home. Karima would need someone to help her at the house, and both men had been close to Ranior for a long time.

After they camped, Ilias made himself eat some dried meat and bread, travel rations hastily collected before they had left. Giliead and Irissa just sat and stared at the fire.

Ilias knew Giliead had been waiting for this moment all his life, his first wizard hunt. Well, it was finally here, and happening in the most terrible way possible. Ilias hadn't thought they had had any illusions about what a Chosen Vessel's life was like—a wizard had tried to kill Giliead when he was a boy, had been ready to kill Ilias, Irissa, Karima, everyone in the house. It had killed a friend of Ranior's, who had been helping to guard them. After that, Ilias had counted them all as somewhat experienced. Now he was starting to realize how foolish that had been.

And he was still wondering about the panpipe, had been wondering about it on the long ride. Now he said, "Delphian didn't curse everyone at the party, did he? They all thought he told such a wonderful poem, everybody but us. What if the poem was a curse?"

Staring bleakly at the fire, Giliead stirred. "I don't think it worked like that. That would have been too obvious. Maybe the curse just made his poem more...attractive, to everyone who was listening. Like the wizards who make themselves beautiful, to lure people in."

That seemed a likely curse for a mediocre poet to want. "It wouldn't work on you, because you're a Chosen Vessel. But why didn't it work on me and Irissa?"

"You were sitting next to me," Giliead said, then his expression froze. He added, "It couldn't have been a very strong curse."

There was an old unfunny joke, 'Never sit next to a Chosen Vessel.' *This didn't happen because of you*, Ilias wanted to say, but couldn't. Denying it aloud would sound like Ilias believed the opposite and was trying to convince himself otherwise.

"Why did he choose Ranior?" Irissa poked at the fire with a

stick. "Why not Erinni, Bythia, Halian..." She had wept while they were riding, quietly, without any noise, the tears streaming down her face. Now in the firelight her nose was red and her eyes looked bruised.

"Something must have made Ranior suspicious." Giliead's voice was slow and thoughtful. "Delphian said he came from Syrneth, and Ranior's been there several times. Maybe Delphian said something about it that Ranior knew was wrong."

"Maybe it was because he was your father," Ilias said. He realized a moment later, when Giliead's shoulders tensed, that it was a mistake. But it was said now and there was no way to take it back. He rubbed his eyes, and said helplessly, "He knew you were the Chosen Vessel. Maybe Ranior was supposed to go mad and kill you."

Giliead didn't say anything. Irissa shook her head, and said bleakly, "It's not your fault, Giliead. Ranior knew the risks. He was Menander's friend long before you were Chosen. Ranior could have left us, let his family buy him out of the marriage, and gone to live somewhere else. He stayed because he wanted to be with us."

Ilias wasn't sure that made things any better.

The rain started before dawn the next morning. It would have been devastating if they had been trying to follow Delphian by his horse's tracks, but it didn't disturb the signs the curse had left. It led them further up into the hills, and in the afternoon they reached an isolated farmstead. It was just one rambling wooden house and several outbuildings, with pens and a poorly maintained garden patch.

"He went there," Giliead said, frowning at the ground as they reined in in the muddy yard. "But I don't think he's there now."

They swung down off the horses, tied them at the trough, and went to the door of the house.

It stood partly open and Giliead pushed in first, stepping sideways to give the others room to enter. Ilias pulled his hood back, shedding rainwater as he shook his head vigorously.

"Who are you?" someone called out. "What do you want here?"

Ilias looked up at the man suddenly looming over him. He lifted his chin, facing him aggressively. "To get out of the rain, what does

it look like we want?"

Irissa shoved past Ilias, yanked her hood back and fixed the man with an angry glare. "Who are you?"

He stepped back, chagrinned. A woman's presence meant that they were respectable travelers. "Sorry, didn't see you there. We're careful of strangers here."

If Delphian had been here, they hadn't been careful enough. Ilias knew isolated communities should be wary of men traveling alone, men who weren't the traders or hunters they were accustomed to seeing. But Delphian might have used curses to ease his way.

Giliead scanned the room. There was a step up to a raised stone floor, and a fire in a center hearth banishing the damp. A half-dozen or so people sat around it on couches or stools, in various states of dampness, all staring at the newcomers. A couple of children played on the floor, and Ilias could smell wet wool and leather, and meat cooking in olive oil.

A woman, with sun-faded blond hair and a gold wrap still damp from the rain came forward, eyeing them appraisingly. She asked Irissa, "Your husbands?"

"Brothers," Irissa corrected. She threw a look back at Giliead. "Anything?"

"He's been in here," Giliead said, his voice flat.

Irissa turned to the woman. "We're looking for a poet called Delphian. He may be using another name. He was traveling from Cineth, on horseback."

The woman smiled, and someone in the back laughed. "Oh, he's been here, though he didn't have a horse. He called himself Verites, and said there might be someone after him. He said he warmed the wrong bed, down in Cineth."

Giliead stepped forward. "Did any of you touch him?" They stared, uncomprehending, and he said, "I'm Giliead of Andrien, Chosen Vessel of Cineth." His voice turned to ice. "Did any of you touch him?"

The woman stepped back, shaken. "No, not... No. He traded a poem for food, and a room to sleep in. He told us not to tell—"

"What room?"

The others scattered out of the way as she led them to a door at the back of the house. Curious faces peered out at them from the little thatched outbuildings as the woman led them to one on the

edge of the yard.

She reached for the door, and Irissa caught the back of her robe and yanked her back. The woman stumbled, staring, startled at Irissa's determined strength. Giliead stepped up to the door, as Ilias reached for an arrow. But Giliead shook his head. "I don't think he's in there."

Giliead kicked the door and it slammed open. Ilias peered past him to see a little room, with a low bed piled with red and gold woven blankets, a basin and brazier on the floor. The brazier still had hot coals, steaming gently in the damp air. "He knew we were coming." Giliead frowned. "Maybe he can feel us now, too."

Ilias exchanged a worried look with Irissa. He hoped Giliead was wrong about that. She shook her head and let the woman go. "Get back inside," Irissa told her. There was an unspoken *I'll deal with you later*, in her voice.

Backing away, the woman said, "We didn't know. I swear we didn't know."

As she hurried back into the main house, Giliead walked to the edge of the yard to survey the wet fields. Ilias put in, "He has to be making for the forest. It's the only cover."

Giliead nodded. He turned to Irissa, looking down at her, regretful and serious. "We're close, and he must know it," he told her. "You have to stay behind now."

Irissa started to speak, and he added, "If it goes wrong, you're all mother will have left. The village, everyone on the farm, the ones like Cylides who have nowhere else to go. All of it will depend on you as heir."

She winced. After a moment, she said reluctantly, "All right, yes, you're right." She added, "What about Ilias?"

"I'm expendable," Ilias said impatiently.

Giliead rounded on him so fast, Ilias skipped back a step. "That's not funny," Giliead snapped.

It hadn't been a joke. But Giliead couldn't do this alone, and Ilias didn't think he wanted to. Ilias just stared him down, until Giliead said, "We're wasting time."

Ilias and Giliead walked uphill in the failing light, the rain lessening to a light drizzle. They had left the horses behind, since they could

move faster through the dense forest without them. They didn't find Delphian's horse, but found the spot where he had hidden it, not far from the farmstead in a wet copse of trees. There had been horse dung and tracks in the high grass, though the dung had smelled odd. Ilias wasn't sure why Delphian had bothered to hide the horse. To throw off pursuit, perhaps, but revealing that he was a poet had identified him more surely than the horse would have. Though maybe the strange smell of the dung meant the animal was ill, and he had thought the farmers would refuse to have it in their pen. Whatever the reason, the tracks only confirmed what the curse trail was telling Giliead.

It was deep twilight when Giliead stopped, and said, "There."

Ilias saw it a heartbeat later. On the forested slope above the meadow, branches thrashed, barely visible in the dark. Something moved through the trees, something large, about half again as tall as Giliead. Ilias still couldn't hear anything out of the ordinary, but the night had taken on a weird hushed quality he didn't like. It felt like the forest was holding its collective breath, avoiding the attention of the creature passing through the trees. Ilias whispered, "It's not him. It's a curseling. He must have sent it after us."

Giliead nocked an arrow, frowning uncertainly into the dark. "I don't know. There's something about this that doesn't—"

Then the shape broke out of the forest and headed toward them. Ilias tensed, gauging the distance, trying to get a good look at the shadowy creature— "It's not a curseling, it's a man on horseback. It has to be Delphian." He felt a flush of embarrassment, mistaking a horseman for a curseling. It didn't reflect well on his ability to help Giliead.

But as the form moved closer, he made out more detail. He caught the gleam of metal and realized the rider wore armor. A helm and chest piece maybe, and metal bracers and shin guards, barely discernible in the bad light. "Wait, maybe it's not Delphian." Unless Delphian had stolen the armor in Cineth and no one had noticed the theft.

Giliead just shook his head. He lifted the bow again. Raising his voice to a shout, he hailed the rider, "Stop there! Who are you?"

The approaching figure continued toward them and Ilias couldn't hear hoof beats, just the soft pad of something striking the grass. Giliead drew the bow, aiming toward the man. He shouted again, "Speak, or I'll shoot!"

The wind changed and Ilias caught the smell of decay on the breeze, heavy and sickly sweet. An instinctive fear crept right up out of the wet ground and into Ilias' bones, and he felt the skin on the back of his neck prickle. Since Ranior had been cursed, Ilias had felt nothing but numb despair and bitter anger; now he felt afraid. "Shoot him, Gil," he said quietly.

Giliead let the arrow fly.

It struck the man square in the chest, the force of the powerful bow driving the arrow through the chest piece. The man jerked with an impact that should have knocked him off the horse. Then he surged forward, urging the horse into a charge.

The cold chill settled into Ilias' stomach. He said under his breath, "At least now we're sure it's a curseling." He drew his sword and tossed the scabbard aside.

Giliead nocked and fired another arrow, just as the curseling drew a short sword. And again, the arrow rocked him but didn't knock him off the horse.

Giliead dropped the bow and drew his sword. Then the curseling was on them and Giliead dodged one way, Ilias the other. Giliead used his sword like a club, swinging it up to unseat the curseling. A man would have been flung to the ground, but this creature took the blow, swayed and was past them, leaving Giliead staggering with the force of his own momentum.

The curseling reined in and turned to come at them again. Giliead hefted the sword, making it look as if he meant to cast it. Knowing it was a ruse, Ilias backed away to give him room.

Unfortunately, the curseling must have realized it was a ruse as well. The beast made an abrupt turn and bore down on Ilias. He had a heartbeat to decide whether to dive out of the way or try to cut the curseling off the horse. He went for the cut, and stepped sideways and swung his sword up for a two-handed blow. The curseling's short sword chopped down; it met his blade with all the power of the unnatural creature wielding it and the beast bearing down on him. Metal rang, jarred Ilias' arm to the bone and sent his blade flying. The force of the charge should have carried the creature well past him, but the curseling reined in with superhuman strength. As Ilias spun away, a hand seized him by the hair and the back of his shirt.

His feet left the ground and with stunning force he slammed head-first into the hot sweating side of the animal. Leather scraped

his chest as the curseling dragged him up over the saddlebow. The air was knocked right out of his lungs and everything went dark.

Hanging head down, Ilias came to only a few heartbeats later, saw branches fly by and knew they had just entered the forest; under the trees it was dark as the inside of barrel. Ilias' first dazed thought was *Great. Giliead is going to kill me.* The curseling had one hand still knotted painfully in his hair, the other holding the reins. Even jolting like this, Ilias could tell the creature under him wasn't a normal horse, at least not anymore; the smell was foul, like rotted meat. It plunged through the dark forest as if this was an open field in broad daylight, and its breath came in low growls. Ilias reached up under his shirt, managed to grip the hilt of the knife tucked through his belt and pull it free.

He could feel the armor plate on the curseling's leg, and it felt more like bone than metal. *Maybe that's how he got the armor, maybe a curse grew it on him.* That wasn't a pleasant thought. Ilias knew he had one chance and instinct told him to lift the knife and drive it into the ribcage of the sweating beast instead of the rider.

It screamed and jolted sideways. The curseling let go of Ilias to grab the reins with both hands. Ilias shoved up and catapulted himself free, hit the ground and shoulder-rolled to his feet. He staggered and caught his balance, braced to move; it was so dark he could barely see the damn thing. He heard the beast plunge and scream, heard branches break as it moved further away.

Ilias tried to pace it but the creature was so fast he lost it within moments. *It'll go back for Gil,* he thought, turning back toward the open fields.

Running as fast as he could in the dark, Ilias re-traced their path, ducking half-seen branches and dodging trees. After only a few moments he heard something big moving through the forest toward him. Something big on two legs. Ilias slid to a halt and called cautiously, "Gil?"

"Ilias?" Dead leaves crunched underfoot as Giliead burst out of the brush. He grabbed Ilias by the shoulders. "You— I—"

"I couldn't help it, he caught me, and that horse is cursed too, it's not—Wait, listen."

They both froze and faintly, in the distance, Ilias heard branches crashing in a rhythmic beat—the curseling heading back towards open ground. Giliead swore, letting Ilias go. "Come on!"

Ilias plunged after him and they ran, barreling through the

trees. They burst out of the brush and into the moonlight of the open meadow.

The curseling emerged from the trees down toward the end of the meadow, and reined in when he saw them.

"Now what?" Ilias asked, breathing hard.

"We need to get him off the damn thing, whatever it is," Giliead muttered, studying the creature silhouetted in the dim light.

"I stabbed it. It can feel pain." Ilias scanned the field, looking for his dropped sword, and spotted the moonlit gleam of the blade where it lay in the grass about thirty paces away.

"That helps." Giliead started forward, lifting his sword. "Stay with me this time."

"Really?" Ilias snapped. "I thought I'd stake myself out in the middle of the field like a stalking goat." He wasn't incredibly pleased with himself for his mistake either.

Giliead spared a moment to throw him an angry glare, then turned it on the waiting curseling. "We need to get him to charge us."

Ilias didn't think that was going to be a problem.

With a yell, Giliead plunged forward, Ilias with him. The curseling took the bait and spurred his mount forward. Giliead lifted the sword as if he meant to try another useless throw. Then at the last moment Ilias slid to a halt, waving and shouting to distract the rider and Giliead swerved in front of the horse, almost under its hooves.

The curseling tried to rein in but too late; the horse slammed right into the sword and shrieked in pain. It reared back and dumped its rider, and fell with a thump. The rider rolled to his feet, his shortsword ready. Ilias had been right; his armor was bone, and seemed fused to his body.

Ilias ran back a few paces and snatched up his own weapon. He returned to Giliead's side, watching the armored curseling warily. Giliead was breathing hard, still holding the much reduced stump of the sword, his hands covered with the animal's blood. He said, "You were right. That isn't a horse, not anymore."

Ilias threw a glance at the creature, which lay unmoving in the grass. The pale moon glinted off a set of gleaming fangs in a distended snout. He held out his sword to Giliead. Giliead dropped what was left of his weapon and took it.

The curseling watched them, though the bone helmet covered

his face and Ilias couldn't see much detail.

"Delphian," Giliead said the name evenly. "You're not a wizard. But you know a wizard, don't you? He gave you something, something that affects anything it touches. Your body, that horse. My father."

"It was a gift." Beyond a doubt, it was Delphian's voice, hoarse but clearly recognizable. "It wasn't meant to do this. It makes me the greatest poet of this age."

The bone-carved panpipe, Ilias thought. "But where is..." He trailed off. The bone armor.

Giliead seemed to know already. He said, "Was it last night that it started to change, to cling to you, to grow over you—"

Delphian snarled, "You did that. You made it do that. Just being near a Chosen Vessel—"

Giliead ignored that. "Why did you use it on Ranior? Did he suspect you? Did he know—"

"It was a bargain, when the wizard gave it to me." Admitting it made Delphian seem to shrink. He crumpled, sinking to the ground. "If I ever came across a Chosen Vessel, I was to let someone close to him hold it. He didn't say what it would do next." He looked up at Giliead, and Ilias saw the helmet was fused to his face, that blood leaked from under it. "Please..."

Giliead stepped in, spun into the sword stroke and put all his weight behind it. The blade connected with flesh and bone and drove through it.

Ilias stepped back as Delphian collapsed and his severed head rolled away.

Giliead stood there for a long moment, then he tossed the sword down. He said, wearily, "Well, that's done."

Ilias nodded. It didn't change anything, and it didn't help. He didn't feel any relief, or pleasure in Delphian's death. He felt tired, and sorry for the horse.

Giliead had to keep Delphian's head, to take back to show the god and the people of Cineth, but they had to dispose of the rest of the body, to make certain the curse didn't linger here. No one at the farmstead would help them, so Irissa spit at their feet and took shovels out of their shed, daring them to stop her. She, Ilias, and

Giliead dug a shallow hollow in the field and piled brush on it to burn Delphian and the horse's corpse. It took the rest of the night, and it wasn't until dawn, when they were shoveling in the last of the dirt over the charred remnants, that Giliead broke down.

He dropped the shovel, sat down on the ground, and wept, harsh broken sobs that made Ilias' heart twist. He sat next to Giliead and leaned against his side. Irissa dropped her shovel and settled next to them. She didn't cry, she just looked sick and weary.

This is it, Ilias thought. This is what it's going to be like, the rest of his life, the rest of our lives. They had been lucky up to this point, astonishingly lucky. And he understood why Menander had put off taking Giliead on hunts. Menander had loved Giliead too well, perhaps, and had been trying to delay this moment as long as he could.

If Ilias had any sense, he would get up now and walk into the woods, trick some farmer woman into marrying him, and spend his life digging fields and fathering babies. Happy, but not safe. Never safe, and knowing too much about what was waiting out there in the dark, just beyond the god's limited boundary. And how clever it was at slipping through that boundary.

Looking at Irissa, he knew it was the same for her as well, why she hadn't wanted to look for a husband among the young men of Cineth. She couldn't bring a brother-in-law into the Chosen Vessel's house, to be another potential victim and hostage to fate.

The thought that Irissa might turn to Ilias eventually out of desperation, because they both ran the same risk, was bleak past bearing.

Irissa avoided his eyes, and they sat there until Giliead quieted and wiped his face awkwardly on his arm. Irissa said, "We should go. Mother will be worried."

Giliead nodded, gripped Ilias's arm once, hard. They got to their feet to walk back down the hills to Cineth.

end

Houses of the Dead

Ilias didn't notice when they stepped over the boundary of the last god's territory.

They were walking over mossy ground in a beech forest, and had come out on a hill that overlooked a meadow. In the distance, tall trees climbed the foothills up toward the peak of the low mountains, and Ilias could see the notch where the pass was, the sharp-etched outline of the cliffs that framed it. The rock was sandy-colored where the trees thinned out, and he thought the country up there would be fairly barren. Scrub and brush maybe, and not much else. Not many places for curselings to hide. *Maybe that was why they thought it would be safe*, he thought, lips twisting. If his foster father Ranior hadn't been cursed in the middle of the city of Cineth, despite the god and the Chosen Vessels, Ilias might have thought so too.

Giliead came out of the trees behind him and stopped to contemplate the view as well. His expression was resigned. "What do you think we're going to find?" Ilias asked. He had held off asking until now, through the long days and nights of walking, and thought he might as well get it over with.

Giliead took a deep breath. "Dead people. The wizard long gone." He looked down at Ilias, smiling a little. "You know as much as I do."

"That's not comforting. I don't know anything," Ilias commented as he followed Giliead up the hill. But that was the first time he had seen Giliead smile since Ranior's death. Maybe the trip was doing him some good. It was still the work of a Chosen Vessel, even if there was nothing much left to do.

The message asking for help had come for Menander, the Chosen Vessel of the Uplands, but Menander was wounded and still recovering, and had conceded that it was time for Giliead to hunt on his own. Especially a hunt like this, where it sounded as if there wasn't much left to do but assure the survivors that the wizard was

gone.

Ilias kept walking, only realizing several steps later that Giliead had stopped.

He turned to face him, taking advantage of the pause to tighten his queue and tie the rest of his braids back. "What?"

Giliead's face had that look of inward concentration. He said, "The Uplands god's territory ends here."

Ilias stopped. A cold sensation settled in his belly and he had the sudden urge to look around for curselings. He shook it off; he had scanned the meadow from the top of the hill and it was empty. The woods on the far side were another matter, but there was nothing in the meadow. *Don't be an idiot*, he told himself. *You've been at sea, that's godless territory.*

But somehow the sea was different.

He realized Giliead was regarding him with a lifted brow, as if expecting more of a reaction. Giliead had been gifted at birth by the god that watched over Cineth, the city nearest the family farm; the gift made him into a Chosen Vessel with the ability to smell curses and see the traces they left in air, earth and water. This was different for him. Ilias glared. "All right, what are you waiting for?"

Giliead's brows quirked, and he stepped over the boundary.

It was the morning of the next day when they walked into the traders' camp. The traders had put their wagons in a half circle, stretching oiled canvas between them to make a large tent, and had dug a firepit at the front. Fur rugs and wool carpets had been spread under the canvas to make a seating area, with a few carved camp stools. Heavy mountain draft horses with shaggy manes and a few mules grazed nearby.

Sentries had seen them approach and had followed them through the trees at a distance, though everyone Ilias saw looked more tired than hostile. A man came out from under the canvas shelter to greet them, his expression understandably wary. Camping in godless country, even for a group this large and this well-armed, was still a calculated risk. He asked cautiously, "Travelers?" He was big, his red-brown hair braided with a collection of metal trinkets and beads.

"I'm Giliead of Andrien, Chosen Vessel of Cineth," Giliead corrected him. "This is Ilias, my brother."

"Ah." His brows lifted, but he didn't comment. At seventeen seasons, Giliead looked young to be a Chosen Vessel, and Ilias was only a couple of seasons older. They didn't look like brothers, either. Ilias had been adopted by the Andrien as a boy; he was short, stocky, and blond like the inland Syprians, and Giliead was tall, chestnut-haired, and olive-skinned, like the coastal people. The man said, "I'm Macchus." He turned to call toward the wagons, "Laodice, they're here!" He waved for Ilias and Giliead to follow him, saying, "Come and meet the women, they'll tell you what we found."

More people were coming out of the wagons, men and women of various ages but no children or elders, which was what Ilias had expected. It looked as if there were at least two families here, and they looked like ordinary traders, except they wore a great deal of copper and bronze jewelry with polished stones, earrings, armbands, wrist cuffs, hair clasps. They must deal in metal, which explained why they had been associated with the family that had wanted to establish the gold mine. Macchus led them under the canvas, gesturing for them to sit. Giliead took a camp stool, pulling off his baldric and setting aside his bow. Ilias settled on the rug beside him, shedding his main weapons as well. The traders were gathering around, anxious and concerned, and somebody stirred up a brazier and put a jar of wine on it to warm.

A woman took a seat on a camp stool brought by Macchus. "I'm Laodice." She was small, plump and blond, and older than she looked at first glance. "I own the wagons." She looked at Giliead, her expression a little uncertain. "You're the Chosen Vessel from Cineth?"

Giliead nodded, calmly pretending not to notice that it was obvious that everyone thought he was far too young. "Tell me what happened."

Laodice took a deep breath. "You know the story of the Taerae, how they wanted to build a city in the godless section of the pass to mine gold?"

"I do now," Giliead told her. "It wasn't heard of in Cineth until recently."

She nodded. "They kept the word of it close, and only drew settlers from the villages on the far side of the pass. The trading

isn't good there, because the routes from the larger city-states are so long, so many were eager to be persuaded. The Taerae's reasoning was that since there were gods on both sides of the pass, it would keep the curselings off and wizards wouldn't dare to come."

"It doesn't work like that." Giliead's face was grim.

There was an uneasy shifting among the other traders, and someone murmured, "That's for certain."

Ignoring the mutters, Laodice continued, "But they drew settlers, probably close to two hundred people, and started to carve a city out of the rock. They hired more people from the villages down in the valleys to help with the building, and of course they had to buy their supplies from the valleys because there's little land for farming in the pass. They did mine the gold, and for the past few years they did a good trade in it, shipping it out of Cirrdon to the Chaeans." She nodded to someone standing behind Ilias, and he glanced back, surprised to see a Chaean woman. She was dark-skinned as most Chaeans were, her curly hair drawn back in a single braid, with full lips and a nose like a hawk's long profile, and somehow the effect of the whole was that she was beautiful. She wore a short silk jacket over knee-length pants, with a Syprian wool wrap over her shoulders. Laodice said, "This is Tolyi, who negotiates the trade for the Chaeans."

Ilias nodded to her and she gave him a grave nod in return, and he tried to drag his attention back to the story.

Laodice was saying, "At the turn of the moon we went up the pass with our wagons, to pick up the Taerae's shipment and to bring Tolyi to make the trade agreements for the next year. But as we came up the road into the city, we knew something was wrong."

"It was too quiet," Macchus put in, his face hard with the memory. He had taken a seat on the rug next to Laodice's stool. "No one was on the road, and then no one at the gates."

"The gates stood open?" Ilias asked. Some of the people watching twitched and stared at him, and he realized he hadn't spoken until now. *Ilias of Andrien, the Chosen Vessel's mute spear-bearer*. The irreverent thought made it difficult to keep his expression sober. "It didn't look as if there had been a battle?"

"No, there wasn't a sign of any disturbance," Laodice answered him, recovering first. "The gates were open as if they had seen us coming, but with no one at watch."

"We did look for tracks in the dirt," Macchus added. "But the

road was hardened mud, so..." He shrugged helplessly.

"No one came when we called out," Laodice continued. "We knew that something was badly wrong, but thought it might be bandits, or that there had been trouble in the mine or at the river. I left most of the men to guard our wagons, and took Tolyi and a few others to search."

"I thought it was the mine as well," Tolyi said suddenly. Her voice was as beautiful as her face, rich and full. "But as we went through the town, it was too quiet. We saw no one. And of course, we reached the diggings and there was no one there, and no one down by the river panning. There was no hint of anything wrong. Except that there were no people."

"We started to go into the houses," Laodice frowned, rubbing her arms as if she was cold. "We found food laid out on the tables, tools set aside. The animals were unhurt, if hungry and thirsty. They couldn't have been left untended long. We drove the horses and cattle down to the valleys—"

Ilias had been listening in increasing incredulity. He looked up to meet Giliead's puzzled frown. Giliead said, "But there were bodies? They had all been killed?"

Half a dozen people spoke to correct that and Laodice raised her voice to be heard over them, "No, that was the frightening thing. No bodies, no smell of death, except for goat's milk or meat that had gone bad." She lifted her hands. "They were just gone."

"This isn't what we were expecting," Giliead said later, leaning against a wagon. It was evening and torches were lit in the traders' camp as the darkness crept up through the trees.

From here they could see it was still light on top of the mountain, the peak and the notch of the pass outlined in red. Ilias didn't think it could look more ominous if the rocky cliffs near the pass had been carved into skulls. Curseling skulls with horns and big teeth. "No kidding," he said, his voice dry. "I don't remember anything in the Journals about a whole city's worth of people disappearing."

Giliead grunted, sounding both annoyed and distracted, his eyes still on the mountain. Ilias glanced back at the traders, several of whom were at the firepit making dinner preparations. He caught

the scent of roasting meat and his stomach grumbled.

Wizards created curselings and set them loose to kill people. Even in territory protected by a god and a Chosen Vessel, curselings could still creep in and attack isolated villages or farms, if you weren't careful. People who built a city out of reach of the nearest gods and in such an isolated spot as the pass, frequented only by heavily-armed swift-traveling traders, were not being careful. If curselings killed them it was terrible but not exactly unexpected. This... This was something else.

Giliead shook his head. "I wish I could talk to our god. It's not good at answering questions, especially ones that begin with 'why,' but at least it could tell me if it's a bad idea to go up there."

"I can tell you it's a bad idea to go up there, but we still have to go." Ilias scratched his chest absently. Back in the circle of wagons, Tolyi had come out to talk to Laodice. The two women stood near the fire, the light painting Tolyi's dark figure in different shades of bronze and gold. "What about the Uplands god, couldn't you talk to it?"

Giliead let out his breath. "It would take too long. I'd have to travel back down the forest road at least two days, and then get its attention. There's no telling how long that would take with a god that doesn't know me. And it's been too long already. If those people are alive somewhere, trapped or imprisoned, it's been long enough for most to die just from lack of water."

Ilias frowned at him. "Macchus and the others looked for tracks." But Macchus had also said the ground was too hard to leave any. Ilias looked up at the pass again, considering it. He had been deliberately thinking of the inhabitants of Taerae as all adults, avoiding the image of dead children, though it was highly unlikely that the settlers had had none. But Giliead was right, even if the people had been trapped, unless they had had some source of water, it had already been too long.

"If they were taken by curses, I might be able to see the traces of it," Giliead said. He shrugged, his mouth twisting. "Curselings would have left something. Blood, bones, skin, disturbed ground. And they would have killed the goats and horses, too."

"Not guls," Ilias pointed out. Guls only wanted people. They preyed on travelers who were alone, or in small groups. They devoured people whole, leaving no remains, and no way to release the victims' shades.

Giliead shook his head. "Laodice didn't think there were enough guls up there to take all those people. And the settlers knew to be careful of them. Unless they were trapped somewhere, and couldn't get away."

Ilias shifted uncomfortably. He was imagining the hapless settlers lured out and caught in a cave-in somehow, being slowly fed on by guls while he and Giliead and the traders waited and wondered. It made him want to leave for the pass now, this moment, no matter how stupid or suicidal it was. "You really think they could be alive?"

Giliead was silent for a long moment. "No. Not really." He pushed off from the tree trunk, looking off into the gathering darkness.

There was an old trade road that went up through the pass, and the construction of the city had made it well-traveled. It wound gradually up through the grassy hills, past sparse stands of trees. The morning sun was bright and the day promised to be warm; it still didn't look anything like godless curse-haunted territory and Ilias could understand why the settlers had been lulled into believing all would be well.

Laodice, her husband Macchus, and three other men accompanied them, along with the Chaeen Tolyi.

Giliead was walking at the front with Laodice, and Ilias heard him ask, "Was there any word of strangers visiting the city? Any newcomers moving in?"

"We heard of no one, but then we only saw the Taerae once a year ourselves." Laodice looked up at the cliffs above them, frowning.

Ilias found Tolyi walking beside him, and gave her a brief smile. She smiled back, and said, "The Chosen Vessel is your brother?"

"Not by blood," he told her, "I've been with the Andrien family since I was a boy."

"I see." They walked a little more, and Ilias kept his eyes on the brush, though it was an effort. Tolyi was far more interesting to look at. Then she said, "It surprises me that you're both so young."

Ilias managed not to throw her a wary look. He suddenly suspected that her walking with him had nothing to do with his

personal attractions. He shrugged, tugging on his baldric. "We're older than we look."

"Not that much older." Her voice dry, she added, "I have a son older than you, I expect."

This time he did look at her, but incredulously. "Really?" He had thought she was only a little older than Giliead's sister Irissa, at most. She did have the bearing of an older woman, but he had thought it was because she had an important duty as a trading factor.

"Really." Her look was a little amused, and a little flattered. "And I know Syprians keep their boys close. Especially pretty, marriageable boys."

"Not that close." But Ilias looked away, scanning the scrub off the trail and giving himself a moment to think. "Chosen Vessels don't marry. Not often, anyway."

"But he takes his younger brother—"

"Older," Ilias corrected automatically, then swore silently at himself. *You idiot.*

"Older brother, I see."

"What are you saying, Tolyi?" Ilias was obviously losing the subtle battle, he might as well bring it into the open. "Do you think we're lying about Gil being a Vessel?"

"No!" Startled, she stopped, catching his arm to pull him to a halt. "Not that at all. I can see he's a Vessel." She regarded him seriously. "I don't doubt your word. So I'd like to ask you how long you two have been doing this, how many of these hunts have you been on?"

Ilias took a deep breath, pressing his lips together. It was an honest question, and he wouldn't lie to her. "This is the second. The first was...not long ago."

"Oh." She lifted her brows. They looked at each other for a long moment, and by mutual consent both started to walk again.

"Will you tell the others?" Ilias asked her. His heart was pounding. It was hard enough having this much responsibility. Having this much responsibility but with the added burden of the traders looking at Giliead as if he didn't know what he was doing would be just that much worse.

"No," she said quickly, "No." She threw him a wry glance. "I'm sure some of them have guessed already, but it wouldn't do any good to say it aloud."

Ilias suppressed a wince. They walked along for a time in silence. Or at least Ilias tried to keep silent. But he finally had to ask, "What did you mean when you said that you could see Gil was a Vessel?"

She took a deep breath, and seemed to consider before replying. "I've met several Vessels, here and in the Chaeian islands, when they come to make treaties." She looked up, her face set and sad. "He has that look, the fey look. Fated."

Ilias didn't reply to that. He knew what she meant, but he had never seen it. Maybe he had lived with it so long, he couldn't see it. "We're young. But he knows what to do. He's been waiting for this all his life."

They followed the road up through the hills, until the ground grew rocky and the mountain's brown stone shoulders started to rise up on either side. The pass turned into a winding gorge, a few hundred paces wide, with a shallow stream cutting through rock and yellow grass and low scrubby brush.

Walking ahead a few paces, Giliead came to an abrupt halt. "Stop," Ilias said without thinking, shifting the bow off his shoulder. Somewhat to his surprise, everybody did. Laodice and Macchus and the others warily scanned their surroundings, though there was nothing obviously threatening. A few tall trees threw some welcome shade on the road and the stream. The ground was sandy and rocky, and mostly bare of scrub or anything that could be used as cover, up to a hundred paces away. On the far side of the road, nearest the gorge wall, boulders and the remains of an old rockfall lay scattered. Ilias couldn't hear anything but sparrows and rainbirds chirping and the hum of insects.

Giliead cocked his head, turning deliberately toward the stream and the stone cliff face far on the other side. Ilias followed his gaze, stepping up beside him. "You see it?" Giliead said softly. "Right below that pointed grayish rock, in the shadow, there's a ledge."

Ilias squinted. The dappled shade of the trees, the shadows, the striations of the rock all made it hard to... There it was. "I see it." Crouched in the crevice, barely visible, was a man-shaped creature. It was a little like a rock monkey, but taller, and too skinny, and there was something about the way it sat, watching them, that was

not at all animal-like.

"That's a gul." Laodice spoke quietly, stepping up beside Ilias. "Where there's one, there's others. They hunt in packs."

"One to lure travelers off the road, the others to kill and eat," Tolyi added, her face grim.

Uneasily fascinated, Ilias reached for an arrow. "Kill it?"

As if it had heard him, the creature faded back into the shadow, vanishing. Ilias grimaced. "It doesn't matter," Laodice said, absently giving Ilias' shoulder a squeeze as she turned away. "They know we're here, anyway. There's too many to kill them all."

Giliead lifted a brow, exchanging a look with Ilias. *Next time I'll know not to ask*, Ilias promised him silently.

"How did you see it up there?" one of the younger men asked Giliead.

"I didn't see it. I felt it looking at us," Giliead told him. He didn't bother waiting for their reaction, following Laodice as they started down the road again. Ilias moved after him, feeling his back prickle and knowing they were all looking at each other in that way he was growing to hate. *You asked for a Chosen Vessel*, he thought, bitterness settling in his stomach. *What good would it do to be a Vessel who couldn't tell a gul was looking at him?* Just because Giliead had never done it before...

"If all curselings were created by wizards, what wizard created the guls?" Tolyi asked, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

Giliead glanced over at her. "The Journals don't say. As far as we know there have always been guls in the godless territories, especially the mountains. As long as there have been gods." He frowned, facing the trail again.

The sun was nearly straight overhead by the time Ilias had a chance to speak to Giliead in relative privacy. They had reached a point where the stream widened into a pool, fed by a waterfall that broke and tumbled down the rocks of the cliff face. The pool was low now but the channels it had worn showed it was much deeper in the spring when the rains sent water cascading down a much wider section of the cliff. There was a bridge here, built by the Taerae to keep the trade moving when the water covered the old road's path.

The bridge was wide enough for a big trade wagon, with stone pilings and wide seasoned planks. A ford would have probably worked just as well, but Ilias was beginning to think the Taerae had

had more coins than sense. Laodice called a halt there to refill their waterskins, and Ilias moved to join Giliead, who was standing on the bridge looking further up the road.

"How did you feel the gul looking at you?" Ilias asked quietly. The rush of water down the rock would cover their voices but he still kept his back to the others.

Giliead shrugged a little helplessly. "I don't know. It was like it was trying to touch me, from all the way across the gorge." He looked away again. "I think it might have something to do with the way guls shapechange to lure people away. Maybe they see inside our heads, and because I'm a Vessel I could feel it doing that."

It made Ilias uneasy. The seeing inside heads thing was not a comfortable thought, but it would explain why the guls were able to take shapes that were familiar to the people they were trying to lure away. But at least Giliead had demonstrated to the traders that he was a Chosen Vessel. A young Chosen Vessel, but a Vessel nonetheless. That was one less thing to worry about.

The sky was at the edge of twilight when they reached the city.

Ilias stopped next to Giliead as the gorge widened out, the sparse trees and scrub brush giving way to rocky ground. There was a natural gap in the gorge wall, the entrance to another canyon that had been closed in with a wall of cut stone blocks, stretching up a whole ship's length. A log gate was set in the wall and the trail signs and Syrnaic characters for "Taerae" were carved into the blocks above it, touched with paint that was already faded a little from the wind and sand.

The old road curved through the open rocky flat, disappearing as the pass wound away. A new branch of it, lined with stone, turned off and led through the open gates.

It would have been a welcoming sight, after the long walk up the pass, except for the silence, and the unattended wall. Cineth's gates stood open, but there were always at least two sentries there, even though there hadn't been a Raider attack on the city for decades. "See anything?" Ilias asked. Uneasy prickles were climbing his spine, and there was something cold and empty about those open gates, the glimpse of painted pavement he could see through them, the silence that hung over the place. The birdsong

had stopped when they had left the trees and the stream behind, but the quiet hadn't been oppressive before now.

Gilead frowned absently, studying the ground. "Just a... Huh."

Distracted, he moved away, parallel to the wall, pausing occasionally to kick at a rock or scrape his boot over the dust. Ilias followed at a distance, the others trailing more cautiously behind. He knew Gilead wasn't following tracks, but the invisible traces that a wizard's curses left behind.

After a short distance Gilead found a footpath that ran along the city wall. It led through a scrubby grove of trees, to the edge of a shallow pit carved out of the hillside. Gilead stopped, studying the pit, brows knit.

When Ilias drew even with him he saw why. In the center of the pit was a large stake, driven deep into the dirt. Chains with manacles hung from it. "This is interesting," Gilead said, brows lifted. He turned to regard Laodice and Tolyi. "Did you know about this?"

"No, and I don't understand." Laodice came to stand beside them, her expression incredulous. "It's for punishment, I see that, but..."

"They just left criminals out here to starve?" Macchus asked, dubious. "It's a little mad."

Ilias understood their confusion. They couldn't see what Gilead must be seeing. And he thought it was likely that they hadn't known about it. The trees and tall grass blocked it from the road, and the footpath wasn't well-traveled.

"It stinks of guls and curses," Gilead said, watching them carefully. "No one chained out here starved. I doubt they lasted the night."

Macchus swore. Tolyi and Laodice exchanged a look of startled disgust. "Their reasons for secrecy seem more clear now," Tolyi said with a grimace.

Ilias shook his head. No lawgiver worth the name would have permitted this. If one had tried, she or he would have soon found themselves deposed by the town council or the Chosen Vessel. Of course, the Taerae hadn't been burdened with a Chosen Vessel, not having a god to choose one.

"What would happen?" Laodice asked, her face tight and angry. "If this was done inside a god's territory?"

Gilead let his breath out, exchanging a narrow look with Ilias.

Ilias could tell he didn't think the traders had known about this either, and that was a relief. Giliead said, "It would leave." He started back along the path toward the city.

If a god left its territory, the city and the villages around it would lose the protection from curselings, lose the services of the Chosen Vessel to defend against wizards; they would have to disperse.

Ilias lengthened his steps to catch up to Giliead. "Would a god really leave for something like this?" he asked, low-voiced. The only mention in the Journals of a god leaving that he could remember had been when the people of the town had killed its Chosen Vessel.

Giliead threw a look back at the traders. He snorted. "I have no idea. And I'd rather not find out."

They reached the open gates, the others following. On the far side the road opened into a surprisingly large plaza, and the buildings under the looming cliffs were elaborate, with narrow pillared porticos and entablatures carved with rosettes. All the decoration was painted with touches of red, green, purple, yellow. As the traders fanned out in a loose circle, watching the doorways cautiously, Ilias stared; he hadn't been expecting anything so ornate. Then he realized these buildings were only façades, carved and built on the cliff faces, with the doorways leading back into the rock.

"The place was honeycombed with caves already," Laodice explained, seeing his surprise. "That's why they chose it. They camped in them when they first came here to look for the gold."

Ilias shook his head, not sure he had heard right. "They what?"

Giliead lost his air of abstraction, turning to stare incredulously at Laodice. "They camped in caves in godless territory? In a gorge full of guls and curselings?"

"That's what I said," Macchus put in, keeping his gaze on those empty dark doorways. "Bunch of crazy people."

"It was hardly wise," Tolyi admitted. "But they were able to mine the gold, and they came to no harm. At least, so they said."

Ilias glanced back at her, hearing the skepticism in her voice. "You think they lost people before this, and just never told anyone?"

Tolyi shrugged. "They knew to use the guls as a method of execution. And it seems unlikely that of all the people they brought up here, no one fell victim to them, or anything else, before this

happened." She lifted a brow at Laodice. "The traders take many precautions, but they lose people."

Laodice nodded, her mouth set in a grim line. "A few a year. If we lost more than that, we'd drop the route and look for trade somewhere else." She added, "We'd argued about this before, Tolyi and I, but now I'm beginning to think she's right; there must have been some warning of this that the Taerae ignored."

Oh, lovely, Ilias thought, exasperated. Giliead flung his arms in the air, a silent gesture of frustration at the general stupidity of some people, and crossed the plaza toward the largest façade.

Three steps led up to a narrow portico with columns and a broad square doorway. The painted carving was all very fine, with stylized figures of miners carrying lumps of rock, and the letters for "Taerae" repeated over and over again. Ilias' mouth twisted, though he didn't comment aloud. He was beginning to form an even more cynical picture of the Taerae. He vaguely remembered learning the name of the family who had first settled Cineth from one of the poet Bythia's stories, but he couldn't recall it now. Whoever they had been, they had paid more attention to placing their new city well within a god's territory than to carving their name over every public building.

Thias, one of the younger traders, took down a bowl lamp hanging from the portico and began working with tinder and flint to light it. Ilias stepped to another lamp, standing on tip-toe to look into it. There was still olive oil – good olive oil, by the smell – in the bottom of the red glazed pot. He went to the dark doorway where Giliead stood.

The daylight only reached far enough to show them the red, black, and white swirls of a mosaic floor and the red walls of the foyer. Past that the blackness was like a solid wall. With no windows, no atrium, nothing to let in light and air, he couldn't imagine living in it. Ilias could see where the portico had been built onto the front of the cave, where stuccoed blocks and mortar joined raw stone. The air inside was cool, carrying a hint of incense, rotted food, and more olive oil.

Thias and Macchus brought the lamps, Giliead took one, and they moved forward into the dark house.

Past the foyer, the rooms were a warren of caves, the walls smoothed with clay, with paint and carving. The pools of lamplight gave them glimpses of fine furniture, carved silverwood and cedar,

sheepskin rugs, fine pottery lamps and water jars, a delicate alabaster wineset on a low table inlaid with polished stones. At first it was all sterile, and Ilias had no sense of this having been someone's home. Then they moved from the public rooms to the private, and the lamp caught a loom still warped for a half-completed green and blue blanket. A child's beaded rag doll lay on a cushion, an unrolled scroll on a side-table, someone's sandals with a broken lace at the foot of a couch. A cup of water and a half-eaten seedcake, flies buzzing around it in the stillness. Ilias felt his skin creep. Giliead stopped, looking down at a discarded shirt draped over a stool. It was small enough to belong to a girl or a young boy, and the sleeves were stained with dirt. He asked, "How many houses did you go into?"

"I'm not sure," Laodice said from somewhere behind them. She sounded a little ill; Ilias could sympathize. "We went up and down the streets, going into houses at random. It was all like this. We searched again when we were driving the animals out. We called and called, and no one answered." She took a deep breath, as if steeling herself. Ilias looked back and saw Tolyi squeeze Laodice's shoulder, her face set and still.

Giliead nodded, biting his lip. "Did you go to the mine?"

"Five of us went down into it," Macchus answered. "We thought the bodies might be there. But there was nothing."

"That...must not have been easy," Ilias said. The traders had done things he wasn't sure most Syprians would have been able to do. He was fairly certain most of the population of Cineth would have sensibly fled in terror at the sight of the empty city, and not searched it diligently for survivors.

"It's not very deep. They got most of the gold out of the river." Macchus shrugged uncomfortably. "We had to look; we knew them."

"Show us where you searched," Giliead said.

The sky was turning dark by the time they finished walking the streets. It was all as Macchus and the others had said: Empty houses, undisturbed except for what dust and wind and small scavengers had done. At the far end of the town, they had gone down the short distance into the mine, and to the river shore where

the gold-panning had been done.

They came back to the plaza finally and Giliead and Ilias stood together, the others moving off a little to give them privacy to talk. Macchus had lit a couple of torches and put them into the holders on the portico of the Taerae house, but it only seemed to emphasize the deep shadows. Giliead let out a long frustrated breath. "There's nothing here. Not a hint of a curse. It's as clean of curses as the god's cave at home."

Ilias rubbed his face to conceal his expression, and said, low-voiced, "It's supposed to be easy. You're supposed to show up, follow the curses, kill the wizard, and go home. You're not supposed to have to unravel mysteries that will have poets guessing for generations to come."

Giliead was still deep in speculation. "If a wizard had come and cursed them all to follow him, he would have had to take them down the pass into the Uplands or walked straight into the territory of the god of Sareth, and we would have known of it. And one wizard couldn't take upwards of two hundred people. Some of them would have escaped, or the traders would have found bodies littering the road."

"Maybe it was a very powerful wizard. Or two of them working in concert." Though that was very rare. Wizards usually preferred to kill each other or turn each other into slaves rather than work together. "But that doesn't explain where they went. Unless they didn't take the road, and they're still in these mountains somewhere. There's a lot of country to get lost in."

"I know, but... That doesn't feel right." Giliead was staring at the open gates. "Whatever happened, it happened here."

It probably should have turned his blood cold, but Ilias just felt relief. Giliead might not be able to see any curses here, but he was sensing something. He kept quiet until Giliead scratched his head, frowning absently, the moment of abstraction over. Ilias asked, "So what do you want to do?"

"Stay here tonight," Giliead answered immediately. "Look for shades."

They camped in the center of the plaza, collecting wood from the stores near the empty houses to build a large fire. The night was

clear, so they wouldn't need the tents the traders had brought, and Ilias found it better to have an unobstructed view of the dark doorways. They had talked over the idea of closing the gates for the night, but Giliead had pointed out, "Anything that's likely to come at us isn't going to be stopped by a gate, locked or not."

Everyone had nodded glumly, and Laodice had added, "I suppose if we have to run for our lives, it would only slow us down."

While Nias and Liad, the other two younger traders, were making a dinner of graincakes and dried travel meat, Giliead and Ilias went to look for shades.

The best place to look was usually in abandoned houses and out of the way corners, places where the shades might linger without being noticed. If they were noticed, someone would always try to find their remains to do the rites, or send for a Chosen Vessel to lay them. With the town being nothing but abandoned houses, it didn't narrow the search.

They decided to start with the most obvious spot, and headed for the rocky flats near the mine and the river, where the Taerae had buried their crematory urns.

The moon was full enough that they didn't need a torch, and the firelight would interfere with Giliead's ability to see curse traces anyway. It was odd, walking through the dark empty town. Ilias was used to dark fields, dark forests, dark beaches, and the limitless sea, but the sensation of walking past houses and wells and stables, without a hint of candlelight or a banked fire under a bread oven, without a murmur of human or animal sound, made his flesh creep in a completely new way. It made him want to talk, though he knew it was foolish. "If there aren't shades— never mind." The people of this town were dead; he shouldn't imagine they were here to rescue anyone.

Giliead's eyes were on the dark windows and doorways. "There are guls here."

"Of course there are," Ilias said under his breath, feeling the hair on the back of his neck stand up.

Giliead stopped him with a hand on his shoulder, pointing toward the upper story of a house. "There. See it? It's making itself look like Irissa."

"Motherless bastard." Sighting along Giliead's arm, Ilias studied the darkness cloaking the house's eaves. He couldn't even tell a

window from a shadow at this distance, much less see a figure imitating their older sister. "I can't see it, but that's just as well, really."

Giliead moved on. "They're all through here now. They must have crept in at dusk."

Ilias shook his head, trying to distract himself from the fact that the empty buildings all around them were full of shapeshifting curseling guls. "At least the traders know you're really a Chosen Vessel now."

"What?" Giliead stopped, staring down at him.

"Oh, they believed it, they just didn't—" Ilias wished he hadn't brought it up. "Tolyi thought we were young, and I think the others did too."

He couldn't see Giliead's expression, but he sounded incredulous. "We are young."

"Too young," Ilias clarified. "Young enough to be kept at home."

"Oh, fine." Giliead rubbed his forehead, annoyed, and started walking again. "That helps."

The street opened up into the flats, and soon they were facing the burial ground. In the dark it was just an empty rocky field, distinguished from waste ground by the lack of scrub. Moving out over it, Ilias' boots kept knocking against plates and cups set out with offerings to the dead, long ago rotted away. Giliead stood for a moment near the center of the space, then abruptly veered away toward the hill where the ground dropped away toward the distant rush of the river.

Ilias followed more carefully, wrinkling his nose at the odor as broken crockery and glass grated under his boots. They were drawing near the town's midden.

The piles of garbage were just low mounds in the dark, and he could hear the buzz of nightflies. Giliead stopped abruptly and Ilias froze in step with him. After a long moment his eyes found movement among the piles of trash.

It was a woman, moving with short disjointed steps. She was pale as milk in the shadows, dark hair ragged against her back, her dress hanging loose, dragging in the dust. Something about the way she moved suggested youth, that she was barely old enough not to be called a child. But when she turned her head toward them, the shadows clung to her, hiding her face.

Giliead paced slowly toward her, his face distant. "She's looking

for her brother," he said softly.

Ilias felt his skin prickle with a chill that had nothing to do with the cool night air. "A child?" he asked.

Giliead frowned. "Older brother. She says they meant to do the rites for her, but then they were gone."

Ilias knew from the Journals that shades weren't the best sources of coherent information. They knew vaguely about things that had happened while they were alive, and even more vaguely about events afterward, but they were wrapped up in their own memories. They didn't sit around and watch living people, or understand much of what they saw. Giliead moved sideways, slowly pacing her unsteady progress. He said, "They were travelers, coming up the mountain pass from the other side. They came alone, they were afraid."

"They were running from something?" People usually traveled in traders' caravans for safety, when they couldn't take a ship along the coastline. The girl and her brother must have had a powerful motivation to cross godless territory without even waiting for the next traders' trip. "From what took the Taerae?"

Giliead shook his head slowly. "The Taerae were here, when she reached the city. I think she died before it happened. Whatever it was." Then he went still, the line of his back conveying a tension that set Ilias' nerves on edge. Giliead stepped back, shaking his head slowly, and as he turned Ilias saw his face in the moonlight. His brows were knit in confusion. "What?" Ilias asked. "What did she say?"

Giliead squeezed his shoulder. "She thinks the Taerae killed her brother, because they thought he was a wizard."

Ilias stared at the girl's figure, growing indistinct as she moved further into the midden. He had the sudden sick feeling the girl's remains hadn't been overlooked, or that the disaster that had befallen the town hadn't delayed the rites. "They killed her too, and threw her body in the midden." In a sick kind of way, it didn't surprise him. People who used guls as a method of execution were capable of anything.

"We'll look for her body tomorrow. I want to get back to the others." Giliead's eyes were on the town, the rock that formed the houses touched with silver in the moonlight. "I think I know what happened, now. Or part of it."

The traders were waiting in the plaza when they returned, sitting in a close group around the fire. Laodice and Macchus were turned to face the dark caverns of the houses, weapons near at hand, while the others ate. It was a relief; the walk had been just long enough for Ilias to imagine what it would be like to reach the plaza and find them missing.

The traders looked relieved to see them as well, shifting to make room at the fire. "Did you find anything?" Laodice asked, as Nias slid graincakes off the pan for them.

"Yes. There's been a wizard here." Giliead laid his sword across his lap. "As soon as it's light, I want you to go back down the pass. I don't know if he's still here or not, but if he is, we've been lucky so far. There's nothing you can do to help, and being here will just make you targets."

Everyone stared, startled. Tolyi exchanged an expression of blank surprise with Laodice, then asked, "Truly? But how—"

Ilias wrapped the crumbly cake around the dried meat and took a big bite to conceal his expression. The traders might have tried to hide it, but they had really had their doubts. That made it almost a pleasure to deliver this information. Almost.

Giliead explained, "I found a shade. She was traveling through the pass with her brother; he was a wizard."

"I didn't know wizards had sisters," Liad said tentatively.

"They mostly don't," Ilias told him, brushing crumbs off his shirt. "They leave their families, or kill them."

"This one was young, and running from something." Giliead's eyes turned distant as he sorted over the impressions the girl's shade had given him. "He didn't have many curses, and hadn't been taken as an apprentice by another wizard yet. His sister wasn't certain, but that's what he told her he was running from."

"He didn't want to learn curses?" Laodice asked, her expression dubious.

"It's not so much an apprenticeship as it is an enslavement," Giliead said. "The younger wizard learns from the elder, but only so he can better do the elder's bidding. Once he learns too much, the elder usually kills the apprentice. Or tries to." He added, with a trace of irony, "Many wizards try to avoid it."

Ilias kept his expression carefully neutral. What Giliead wasn't

saying was that there were people who could be wizards, but had never learned to curse, or at least never used what few curses they did have for ill. This knowledge was kept only by the Chosen Vessels, passed along only to those who needed to know it. As far as they could tell, the gods didn't mind the existence of these potential wizards, so the Vessels didn't intentionally seek them out. As long as they weren't doing harm or using curses, they could live as they wanted. But explaining this to terrified townspeople wasn't an easy thing to do, so the Vessels kept it as secret as possible. And those potential wizards were still dangerous, still likely to draw stronger wizards who wanted to take them as slaves for their power.

"Someone in the town must have realized what he was, the sister wasn't sure how or why," Giliead was saying. "They were short of coins and had little to trade, so he may have tried to use a curse to get them food or shelter or a passage down the pass, and been caught at it. When the Taerae attacked them, the girl was killed." He looked away with a grimace. "I don't know how. Shades usually don't remember the moment of their death very well."

Laodice was frowning and Tolyi shook her head, her face set in lines of disgust. Tolyi said, "The girl was an innocent." She looked up, lifting her brows. "At least she would be considered so in my land."

"Here too," Laodice said with a wince. "Families aren't responsible for the crimes of one member, even a wizard's crimes. I didn't realize how...beyond the bounds the Taerae had gone."

"They should have kept quiet and summoned a Vessel," Macchus pointed out practically. "Then they'd still be alive."

Giliead nodded grimly. "Exactly. The Taerae brought this on themselves. Unfortunately, they brought it on everyone in the town as well."

"But if this young wizard had little experience, how did he kill all the townspeople? And how did one man conceal all those bodies?" Laodice asked, making a helpless gesture.

"Perhaps he was deceiving the sister about the depth of his knowledge," Tolyi said thoughtfully.

"It's possible," Ilias said, "but if he was, the Taerae would never have caught him."

Giliead took a sharp breath. "Yes. She distinctly remembers that the Taerae discovered him, that he was caught by surprise. An

experienced wizard wouldn't have been." He shrugged a little. "In trying to save himself, he may have drawn something else."

"Something else?" Macchus echoed.

"Another wizard or a new kind of curseling," Giliead said.

"Something that could destroy the townspeople. Whatever it is, it may still be here. And the young wizard, the girl's brother, may be up here somewhere as well. She thinks he was killed, but she didn't seem to have an image of it happening. That's why I want you to leave at first light."

Laodice looked worriedly from Ilias to Giliead. "Your brother will come with us?"

Ilias snorted. "No."

Giliead regarded him a moment, one brow lifted. Ilias stared back steadily. Giliead smiled faintly, and looked at Laodice. "No."

They spent the night with three people always on watch, but no one got much sleep. Ilias sensed movement at the corners of his eyes every time he turned his head. He knew the guls clung to the shadows and watched them all night.

Ilias gave up on sleep long before dawn and helped Macchus make breakfast. Then Macchus insisted on dividing up the supplies the traders had brought, leaving Giliead and Ilias enough food for more than twelve days. "I don't think it's going to take that long," Ilias told him. If their limited past experience was any guide, it would either be over very quickly or not happen at all.

Macchus just grimaced and pushed another packet of grain at him.

By the time the sky was lightening to gray with dawn, the traders were ready to leave.

"Be careful," Laodice said, watching them worriedly. Earlier, she and Tolyi had gently tried to persuade Ilias to leave again. They were so earnestly tactful, it was impossible to be angry. It was possible to be annoyed and resigned, however. She asked, "How long should we wait?"

She meant, *how long should we wait before accepting the fact that you're dead*. Ilias looked at Giliead, lifting his brows. Giliead just smiled faintly and said, "If we're not back down the pass in three days, send for another Vessel."

The others said their grave farewells, and walked away down the road. Ilias gave them one last wave as they reached the bend of the trail. "They think we're going to die."

"Yes. Yes, they do," Giliead said, rubbing the bridge of his nose wearily. "I was surprised they didn't insist on doing the rites for us before they left. And they were shocked senseless that I actually found traces of a wizard up here. Even if it might not be the right wizard."

"That was a little obvious." Ilias looked up at him. "I guess we'll have to wait until dark to lure him out. You want to search the town some more, so if he is here and watching us, he doesn't suspect that we know about him?"

Giliead nodded absently, turning to look back at the empty plaza. The wind had piled up floating weeds, making a barricade over a few of the doors. "But let's take care of the sister's shade first."

Ilias grimaced agreement. He didn't like to think of her wandering the midden, and if anything happened to them, it might be a long time before another Vessel could get up here. The rites were simple and quick to perform; if a person died near home, you scattered three handfuls of earth on the body. If the death occurred elsewhere, or at sea, or if it was a stranger's body, you used three locks of hair. It was customary to get three people, but you could also use three locks from your own head if you had to. Even very old shades could be sent to rest this way; it didn't matter if the body wasn't intact, even a few bones were enough.

The town seemed even more silent as they walked back through the empty streets toward the river. Ilias had never noticed silence like this before. Even counting time spent in Cineth and other noisy populated cities and villages, he was more used to quiet places than not. There was just something about this silence that felt...as if it was masking the presence of something else. "Something's here," he said.

Giliead wasn't surprised. "I don't think we're going home empty handed."

They reached the midden and Giliead stepped on top of a low pile of broken crockery, animal bones, food waste, and broken furniture. The buzz of flies was intense. "The shade was right around here. And I have the feeling it wasn't long after she was killed that whatever it was happened—"

"So she'll be near the top," Ilias finished, taking the next pile over, wincing at the heavy odor of rot. This was what the Journals didn't mention about the lives of Chosen Vessels and their companions. Ilias supposed it didn't make good poetry: *And then the Vessel of Cineth Giliead and his foster brother Ilias spent the afternoon digging in the middens looking for parts of the dead girl, hoping the dogs hadn't gotten to her and that they could find enough of her to perform the rites on.*

For some time, Ilias kicked aside dirt clods and dried dung, shards of glass and pottery, while Giliead dug in the other pile. Then Ilias hesitated as he spotted a tangle of stained yellow cloth. He crouched down, shoving away at the debris on top. *Yes, there it is.* A hand, still attached to a slender forearm, the flesh discolored and sunken with rot. He grimaced, twisting around to say, "Gil, I found—"

It was dark. Dark as the inside of a black cloth sack, the still air cool and a little damp, no sun, no stars, no moon. Ilias' throat went dry and his heart squeezed in his chest, skipping a beat. *Oh...no.* "Gil," he said softly.

Silence. There was no hint of the rush of the river, or the wind scattering dust and grit against the rocks. His eyes were starting to adjust and he could just make out shapes in the darkness. He was facing back toward the town and he could see the rooflines of the houses, black against the lighter darkness of the sky, but they marked a set of structures far taller than they should be, and the shapes were all wrong. *I don't know where I am.*

"Here." Giliead's voice was quiet but tense, maybe only ten paces away. Ilias bit the inside of his cheek to hold back a sob of relief. "You see this too?"

"Yes," Ilias managed to say, mostly evenly. "This isn't— Where are we?"

Maddeningly, Giliead countered with, "What do you see?"

Ilias gritted his teeth. "It's all dark, the sky is like black water. I can see the town, but it's all wrong. Everything's too big, like it grew or I shrunk." He turned slowly, feeling gritty stone under his boots. He realized the midden pile under his feet was different; it was all black gravel and rock now, the detritus vanished with the odor. And the rest of the world. "The mountains go up forever." They were like black glass, glinting faintly, high above the canyons. *And that doesn't make sense,* he thought, sick. There was

no light, nothing to make that faint silver reflection. He shouldn't be able to see at all.

"All right, that's...good. I'm seeing what you're seeing." Giliead sounded a little shaky. "Except I can also see the town, the midden in daylight, just like it was a moment ago." There was a faint crunch and he heard Giliead swear. "This is like being hit on the head until you see two of everything."

Ilias turned toward the sound, his heart beating a little easier. If Giliead could still see the real world, then this was just a wizard's illusion. Which meant there was a wizard nearby and Ilias was as good as blind and Giliead nearly so, but they weren't dead yet. Squinting, he thought he could see Giliead as a distorted shape in the dark, about where he had been standing before. "Is that you? Can you see me?"

"Uh, no. I can't. Wait. Move, wave your arms or something." Ilias waved vigorously, and Giliead said in relief, "I can see you in the dark world." He added a little worriedly, "But not in the daylight world."

"Oh, that's..." That really wasn't what Ilias wanted to hear. He took a sharp breath, trying to get his pounding heart under control. "What kind of curse is this?"

"It's not a curse. I don't feel a curse, I can't see any traces." Giliead sounded uneasy and baffled. "It's as if you're somewhere else, and I'm caught between."

Not a curse and somewhere else. Ilias tried to think about what that meant and stay calm. It wasn't easy. "Is this what happened to the Taerae?"

"That's a good guess." Ilias could hear Giliead moving, turning, his boots crunching on the pebbles. "There," Giliead said suddenly.

Ilias turned, following what he thought was Gil's pointing arm, and saw a crumpled bundle on the ground. He started toward it, but his boot slipped and he stumbled sideways, flailing to regain his balance. Giliead said sharply, "You all right?"

"Yes, it's the rock here. It's like glass. Cuts like it, too," he added as he lifted his boot and felt the slit in the leather.

"It cut you?"

"Just my boot." For a moment, Ilias didn't understand the tone of alarm in Giliead's voice. Then cold realization hit. "This isn't some kind of dream, illusion, whatever. Things here can affect me. Maybe both of us."

He heard Giliead take a deep breath. "Just...be careful."

Careful, Ilias thought, *if that's the best advice he has...* They moved toward the one thing visible that wasn't black stone. It was a body, a man, dressed in the rough kilt of a laborer. Giliead kept an eye on their surroundings, since he was the only one who could see in both worlds, while Ilias nudged the body cautiously with a boot, then rolled him over. He crouched down to look more closely. The man was young, wearing copper earrings, his face and chest marked with livid blue-black bruises. "He's not breathing, but I don't see a wound," Ilias said. He probed cautiously, wincing as he felt the give under his hand. "His ribs are all caved in. Must have been beaten to death." He looked up at Giliead. "He's cold, but not stiff or rotted. He doesn't stink."

Giliead grimaced. "Things must be different in this place."

"Things? The way the world works?" Ilias would have felt a chill in his stomach if he wasn't frozen solid down there already. But it made a weird kind of sense. No sun, no wind, no time, no rot.

"There's another body," Giliead said quietly.

There was a trail of bodies. Ilias followed them across the ground where the middens had been, up into the first street of the weirdly altered town. Men, women, children. Some with open wounds, or crushed skulls, though there wasn't much blood. Ilias lifted a lifeless hand and found bloody skin under the nails. "They did this to each other," he said grimly.

"That was the curse," Giliead said from somewhere behind him.

Ilias had been reluctantly drawing the same conclusion. "A curse, or madness, from being trapped here in the dark for days?"

"That was surely part of it. But they had help." Giliead's voice hardened. "There."

His skin creeping, Ilias turned to look.

Something was moving in and out of the abstract shapes of the black glass doors and windows. It was amber-colored, shedding drifts of mist. It seemed to turn and look at them, and Ilias caught a half-second impression of a human face. Then it was turning away, drifting into the dark.

"That was a gul," Giliead said, while Ilias was still trying to find his voice.

"How—" Ilias started again, realized it was pointless, and swallowed the words. "It didn't look like a gul, but you could tell it was one?"

"Yes." Giliead's eyes studied the dark intently. "There's more. A lot more. I think... We know what happens when a gul takes someone."

"It eats them. It eats their soul, too, that's why there are never shades." Ilias thought he could see other flickers in the dark now, the black glass throwing colors that didn't come from the sourceless moonlight.

"What happens when a gul takes a wizard?"

"I—" Ilias remembered the stake outside the city's wall and his fear dissolved in a rush of angry annoyance. "They couldn't have been that stupid!" If you were going to kill a wizard, you had to do it quickly, no matter how much you wanted to torture the bastard.

"Oh yes, they could have. And that arrogant. If his soul is powerful enough to control the guls..." Giliead was still facing toward the flickers of gul-light. "This happened to us when we were about to find the sister's body, to free her shade. He must not want it freed."

"I did find it. Or at least I found somebody in there. But he can't talk to her, touch her. Can he?"

"I have no idea. I don't even know if he took the guls or if they took him." Giliead turned slowly, looking out into the dark. "Let's go back to the sister's body and see if there's anything else there."

"Uh." Ilias faced the abstract landscape, all obsidian and silver shadow. "Good luck with that."

"This way."

"I know the way, it's just the midden isn't here in this—" Something huge moved above them in the dark and Ilias yelled a warning. He dove sideways, landing badly on the sharp stone. Rolling to absorb the shock, he came to his feet, hearing Giliead hit the ground and recover not far away.

He sensed more wild movement in the dark and yelled again to warn Giliead, ducking sideways as a clawed hand swiped for him. He came back to his feet, dodged in and sliced at it with his sword. He felt a satisfyingly meaty connect and the creature whipped away from him with an ear-splitting shriek. He darted forward and out, swinging at it, and felt the breeze as it grabbed for him again and missed.

He heard footsteps and then Giliead was at his back. "Real world or just here?" Ilias asked, breathless.

"Just here," Giliead said grimly. "I think it's a curseling, created

for this place."

"Oh, that's fine," Ilias muttered. Darkness moved above their heads and the creature made a strange sort of low whistling snarl, giving Ilias a very creepy picture of what its mouth must look like. "Gil, I'll distract it, you go find her body."

"Ilias—" Giliead snarled in frustration. But there was no way to argue; Ilias wouldn't be able to see the corpse, he couldn't even see the middens. "Just be careful!"

"No, really," Ilias snapped. As Giliead bolted for the middens, Ilias dodged forward, toward the moving darkness. He thrust the sword upward and felt it bite into flesh. Something whipped around and knocked him sideways, slamming him into the ground. He rolled away, but the dark shape above him seemed to flow past, following Giliead.

Stumbling to his feet, feeling blood trickle down his face, Ilias could just see the outline of Giliead moving frantically in the dark area where the midden should be. "Look out, Gil, it's after you! It —" He blinked and there was someone standing over Giliead now, vivid and brilliant, like one of the guls.

It was a young man, barely Ilias' age, with bright blond hair and a handsome face. He said, "Leave her alone. Haven't you done enough?"

Giliead kept digging, saying over his shoulder, "She's dead. Don't you want her to rest?"

"I want her with me! I want her here!" the man shouted.

"You got her killed!" Ilias yelled, hoping to distract him. "You only brought her to make it easier for you to travel. If you loved her, you would have left her behind."

"Ilias, come here!" Giliead yelled sharply. Ilias didn't argue; he bolted toward Giliead. Something cold snatched at his arm, his hair, the side of his face. He tore through it, twisting and flinging himself past the clawlike hands. He landed hard at Giliead's feet.

"You all right?" Giliead asked tensely, shoving pebbles out of the way.

"Yes. What—"

"We're surrounded by guls in the real world."

"Oh, then it's worse." Ilias pushed himself up, back aching from being slammed into the rock.

"He's afraid." His breath rough as he shoved at the invisible debris, Giliead said, "Ilias, this isn't a girl's body."

"What—" Then Ilias had it, too. The wizard was lying; he wasn't trying to keep the shade of his dead sister, he was trying to keep his own shade. That was his body in the midden. "But guls don't leave bodies."

"I'm betting they left his," Giliead said tightly. "Maybe whatever curse he used to try to fight them kept them from consuming all of his body. It's given him a hold in their world, let him control them somehow. He must need his shade to keep that control."

Ilias shifted, watching wispy shapes move in the darkness. "Laodice said she didn't think the Taerae would desecrate a girl's body like that. Maybe they didn't even kill her."

"Guls!" Giliead yelled.

"I've got them, just do it!" Ilias shoved to his feet, and swung his sword in an arc. He felt it catch at something, as if he was swinging at silk shrouds. The guls kept drawing back, trying to lure him forward and away from Giliead. But that was the first lesson he had had pounded into him as the brother of a Chosen Vessel, by his foster parents, by the older Vessels who had taught Giliead, by the poet Bythia, by the Journals. *Whatever you're fighting, it'll trick you, it'll taunt you, it'll try to get you away so it can use you against him.* He had no intention of falling for that.

Then light exploded and Ilias yelped and flinched back, his eyes dazzled. It was daylight, he realized a moment later, as sensation flooded back. The wind, the rush of the river, the warmth of the sun on his skin, the foul odor of the rotted garbage. The dark city was gone and he was back in the real world, standing on the edge of a midden pile. Giliead was behind him, crouched in the debris, a knife in his hand as he dropped the third lock of hair onto the body in the midden. There were dead gul-bodies strewn around them, small furry lumps; the live guls still looked like beautiful men and women and had drawn back, watching them with wary malice. Ilias couldn't tell which was the wizard, until one moved forward and he saw its human eyes.

Giliead pushed to his feet. Breathing hard, he said to it, "The Taerae didn't kill your sister, did they? They weren't that lost to reason. They caught you, left you for the guls. They threw what was left of your body here, but you didn't need it anymore. When the gul ate your soul, you took control of it, took control of all the guls here."

The wizard didn't answer, and the wizard-gul sank to the

ground, its body losing the alluring human form and turning lumpy and misshapen. It looked like the monkey-thing they had seen in the lower pass, except its belly was huge and distended.

The other guls were withdrawing, fading away into the shadows. The wizard still didn't answer, and Ilias asked carefully, "Why does he look like that?"

Giliead was watching with a frown of concentration. "He can't control them anymore. Without his shade, all that's left is...whatever part of his soul and body that one ate." He shifted his bow off his shoulder, bent it to string, and nocked an arrow.

The misshapen gul was crawling away, twisting in pain. Giliead's arrow struck it behind the head. It shuddered and collapsed, dissolving into a pool of black fluid.

Ilias sat down on the midden, wanting to collapse as well.

They burned the dead guls, and Giliead dug the wizard's head out of the midden and wrapped it in a shawl scavenged from one of the houses. They would take it back to the traders for proof, then to the nearest god's habitation for burial.

"I thought all the bodies would come back," Ilias said. "The townspeople. Once the wizard was dead."

Giliead shook his head wearily. "I think they're stuck in that other place, with the guls. And even if the bodies did come back, I don't think it would matter. From what we saw, the guls must not really eat flesh; it just looks that way because they don't leave any remains in this world. They actually eat...everything. The soul, the shade, the body."

Giliead was saying that there wouldn't be any trapped shades to release, even if they had the bodies to do the rites on. Ilias was too tired and sore to be horrified at the moment, but he was sure that would come later. "We know there's one shade trapped here." He squinted against the noon sun, looking around the midden. "But where is she? You think she's actually hidden under one of these piles, or was she just drawn here, to his body?" Ilias wasn't looking forward to searching the midden and the town again, and there was always the chance her body had ended up in the river and been carried away, or left in the open and so torn apart by scavengers that there was too little left to be found. But they had to find her.

Ilias was determined to save something in this cursed town, even if it was just a forsaken shade.

Giliead's face was lost in thought. "I have an idea."

They found her outside the city wall, near the pit with the execution stake, curled up under a tree. A wool wrap had been thrown over her, the colors hidden by windblown dirt and detritus. Giliead found a mild curse on the body to keep away scavengers. It didn't prevent them from doing the rites.

"If she was out here, and wasn't taken by a gul," Ilias said, shouldering their waterskin and his pack as they walked toward the road. "He killed her."

Giliead let his breath out, glancing back toward the town. "She must have come out here to try to release him, but she was too late. His body was dead and his soul had taken over the guls. He was one of them now, and he killed her. But maybe he thought he could make her into what he was, if he kept her shade here long enough. He would have her with him, then." He looked down at Ilias, his mouth twisting in irony. "Maybe he loved her."

Ilias made a rude noise. "She showed us where his body was."

Giliead smiled ruefully. "Maybe she loved him."

end

Reflections

Crouching on the rocky flat above the streambed, Ilias studied the sandy gravel below for tracks. "I wish this idiot would just give up so we could kill him and go home," he said in irritation.

"He's not that smart," Giliead replied, sounding weary. He stood above Ilias on an outcrop, surveying the narrow valley where it wound down the mountain pass. The late afternoon light was failing rapidly, as somewhere past the gray clouds the sun sank and the heavy shadows grew under the pine forest covering the slopes. This stretch of the pass was godless and they had seen no trace of anyone alive for days, except the frantic stumbling tracks left by Pheneras.

Ilias pushed to his feet, absently brushing his hands off on his pants. "Can you catch his scent?" He shook the hair out of his eyes; his queue needed to be rebraided and his skin itched from long days of travel. He was wearing a sheepskin jerkin over his shirt, but the dampness in the air made the cold seep into his bones. Giliead didn't look much better off: his chestnut braids had mostly unraveled and his shirt was still stained with blood from the curse Pheneras had thrown at him before the wizard had fled. They both wore swords strapped across their backs but carried horn bows, as the preferable way to kill a wizard was from as great a distance as possible.

Giliead frowned, still looking down to where the stream vanished into the darkening forest. "No. There's something, but it's not Pheneras. I'd know his scent anywhere. This is faint, barely there, and... It comes and goes." He shook his head, shrugging it off. "Maybe it's my imagination."

"I don't like it when you imagine things," Ilias grumbled, shouldering his pack and following him down into the streambed. Especially not out here, when the nearest god was in Theselaë, several days walk down the mountain. Giliead had caught hints of old curses, most rendered harmless by age, all the way up the trail.

In civilized country the gods kept curselings and wizards at bay to a certain extent; out here people had nothing to rely on but themselves. And they had been heading inland long enough that Ilias missed the sound of the sea; the lonely wind through the tall pines and the rush of rocky streams were a poor substitute.

He and Giliead were brothers though Ilias was only a ward of the family, and they didn't look like blood relations. They were both Syprians but Ilias' ancestors had come from inland, where people were smaller with lighter hair and skin. Giliead, from the bigger, darker strain born on the coast, was more heavily built and nearly a head taller. The biggest difference between them was that Giliead had been gifted at birth by the god that watched over Cineth, the city near his family's farm; the gift made him into a Chosen Vessel with the ability to smell curses and see the traces they left in air, earth and water. Sometimes Ilias thought the gift was a curse in itself; some people feared Chosen Vessels almost as much as they did the wizards Giliead hunted and killed.

"Camp here?" Giliead asked. He looked annoyed and disgusted with their progress. Or their lack of progress. In going on seven years of killing wizards, they had never had one run this far or this long. "There's no point in going further tonight."

Ilias considered it, pausing to look around again. Large flat rocks and gravel were strewn down to the sandy flat that led to the banks of the stream. Down toward the woods, the shadows grew under the trees and ground mist crept up through the grass. It was a lonely view, and a cold one, but nothing made his hackles rise. "All right. If we can't catch Pheneras tonight, at least we can catch dinner."

Ilias meant to help, but Giliead had caught three drowsing fish in the shallows of the stream by the time Ilias had found a branch to make a good spear. But then Ilias, wandering the edge of the twilight woods, idly kicking the occasional pine cone or sitting on his heels to poke curiously into a hollow under an old beech, wasn't actually looking that hard. Wet to the knees from wading into the deeper center of the stream, Giliead had the discourtesy to point this out, which led to splashing. Giliead, completely drenched but at least temporarily distracted from his preoccupation with killing Pheneras, came out of the water to tackle Ilias and wrestle him into laughing surrender on the prickly carpet of dead leaves and dirt beneath the pines.

Under the darkening gray sky the lively noise echoed off the cold hollows, and if anything listened, it remained silent.

Sitting in front of the fire waiting for the fish to cook, his damp clothes drying, Ilias was still finding pine needles in inconvenient places. Wriggling, he dug one out from down the back of his shirt, aiming a mock glare at Giliead. The glare failed to land as Giliead was staring abstractly into the dark outside their shelter, the firelight glinting off the copper of his earrings.

They had found a cleft in the rock above the stream with room to spread their blankets and protected enough that they could build a small fire without worry that Pheneras would see it. Though the wizard was such a poor woodsman and so afraid of Giliead, Ilias wasn't much worried about that. "Do you smell redberry?" Giliead asked suddenly.

Ilias snorted, more interested in poking at their dinner where it was baking on the flat rocks next to the fire. All he could smell was woodsmoke and damp earth and about to be overcooked fish. "It's too early for redberry. And I think we're too high up."

Giliead stared out at the dark a moment more, then dismissed it, shaking his head. "Must be something else."

"Then why did you ask me?" Ilias speared a fish with his knife, pulling it away from the fire. He eyed Giliead, noticing his distracted expression. "You feel all right?"

"I'm fine." Giliead gave him an odd look, as if Ilias was the one asking the odd question about the local flora. Shrugging it off, he poked experimentally at his own fish. "I was sure we would have found him by now," he added with a grimace.

"He'll never make the Barrens," Ilias said around a mouthful of fish, shaking his burned fingers. There were no gods in the desert lands on the far side of these mountains, and the empty territory was rotten with curselings and worse. Wizards lived as they liked there, keeping people like cattle; they also guarded their territory jealously and killed their own kind as often as they killed everyone else, but Pheneras had nowhere else to run at this point. Ilias eyed Giliead sharply. "It wasn't your fault, you know." He had said it at the time, but he knew it bore repeating.

There was nothing mock about the glare Giliead fixed on him. "I

wasn't thinking about that."

Ilias lifted a brow. It wasn't an image he was having any luck getting out of his head and he hadn't seen it at close range; he knew it would be that much worse for Giliead. But he said, "I didn't say you were."

Pheneras had been a traveling merchant, using subtle curse-traps and poisons to rid himself of competition and make people pay extravagant prices for his wares. It was the killing of another merchant in Cineth that had drawn Giliead's attention and put him on Pheneras' trail.

After a few days of searching, Giliead had caught him in the fountain square of a small town. It was a warm dusty day, near the noon hour when the men were coming to fill the water jugs and the women to meet and talk. Pheneras, emboldened by his success and unaware there was a Chosen Vessel nearby, had been trying to curse the well. Giliead had sensed it though he couldn't tell what the curse was meant to do; it could have compelled the townsfolk to buy Pheneras' trinkets or made them all fall in lust with him and line up to share his bed or it could have killed anyone who touched the well water. Giliead had drawn his bow, taking aim at the wizard across the square. But he had had to wait for a clear shot, and in those moments Pheneras had seen him and cast a curse.

The god's protection rested on Giliead and most curses didn't work on him, but this curse had been one that, thwarted of its target, had turned on the nearest victim. It could have been Ilias, but he had been angling through the crowd, trying to block Pheneras' escape. The nearest had been a young girl, barely into her full growth, who had died in Giliead's arms with her guts turned inside out.

She had been the only daughter of aged parents too, and in the city-states of the Syrnai only women could inherit land and property. When her mother died her younger brothers would lose ownership of their farm and might end up going begging, if the parents couldn't buy good marriages for them before then. It couldn't have been worse if Pheneras had picked her deliberately.

Giliead said, coldly, "If she'd lived she would have ended up with a curse mark and been shunned by the people who are mourning her now." He looked away, out at the lonely night again. "It's just part of what happens. It's not me that gets hurt, it's always someone else. You should know that better than anyone."

Ilias rolled his eyes. "Right, you never get hurt." Giliead had been dealing with it, or not dealing with it, by pretending he didn't care when the reality was that it wore at him like an open wound. What Giliead needed was to go home, to be with his mother and his sister, the others who accepted him whether they understood him or not. Ilias just wanted to get this over with. When Giliead could bring Pheneras' head to the girl's mother and bury it at the nearest god's cave, then he might have some peace.

Ilias remembered later that he had meant to take the first watch, but he didn't remember waking Giliead for his turn, or lying down to sleep at all. He did remember that he had slept too deeply, curled on his side in the warm nest of blankets, and grumbled without really waking when Giliead shifted around, letting in cold air and laying a hand on his side. Ilias growled a sleepy protest, rolling over on his stomach and burying his head in his arms. A knee brushed his hip as Giliead climbed over him, then he was asleep again.

Ilias woke to birdsong. He rolled onto his back in the tumbled blankets, scratching idly. The light outside was gray with early dawn. He yawned, ready to go back to sleep before Giliead appeared to drag him out of the warmth.

Then he noticed that the fire had gone out, leaving just a heap of cold ashes.

Huh. Ilias sat up, listening, but couldn't hear anything except the chuckle of the stream. Throwing the blanket back, he got to his feet, ducking out of the cleft.

He had expected to see Giliead in the stream again, catching breakfast. But he wasn't there. Ilias squinted up at the sky, realizing the gray overcast had fooled him. It was well after dawn. Starting to worry in earnest, he scanned the area again, but nothing human moved.

He got up last night, Ilias remembered suddenly. *That was hours ago.* "He didn't come back," he said aloud, in startled realization. Swearing, he ducked back into the cleft. Giliead's sword was still there, leaning against the rock in its scabbard, next to their bows

and quivers and packs. Grabbing his own weapon, Ilias ducked out again. It had to be a curse. *So, think. Why did it take him and not me? What did we do differently?* There was nothing that he could think of.

This was why Ilias had decided long ago to accompany Giliead when he went searching for wizards; a strong subtle curse could still snare a Chosen Vessel, though it was rare. He had heard enough stories of past Vessels to know that the ones who had companions on their travels lived longer than the ones who went alone.

Ilias cast about for tracks in the mud between the rocks and found a clear heel print from a very familiar boot. Heading hurriedly downstream, he found another print leading into the forest.

About twenty paces under the trees, still following the stream, Ilias could tell he was on the right track. It didn't take a Chosen Vessel to smell curses in these woods. Though it was broad daylight now the shadow under the heavy green canopy seemed just as dense as it had at twilight. He could tell there was something odd about it and it was almost inconceivable that Giliead hadn't seen it last night. Curses that hid themselves from ordinary people were common enough, but those that could hide from Chosen Vessels were thankfully rare. *Pheneras didn't do this*, he thought, ducking under low branches, *that slimy little motherless bastard doesn't have this in him*. He picked up Giliead's tracks readily and followed them deeper into the dank growth.

He caught sight of a shape out of the corner of his eye and jerked his sword up into a guard position, heart pounding. After a moment he realized the apparition wasn't going to attack.

Ilias stepped cautiously closer. A stunted twisted tree perched on the bank of the stream grew around a man, or what was left of a man. The corpse was shrunken and mummified, like a body that had come out of a bog or been left in desert sand. The wood had grown through the skeleton, twining in the ribs. It didn't look like a good way to die. *What did Pheneras lead us to?* He cautiously stepped close to the curving branches, careful not to touch them. They were wreathed with a vine that looked a little like redberry, though it was unpleasantly fat and succulent, as if the plant had fed off the dead man's flesh. Ilias stepped back, feeling his stomach trying to turn. *It might disappoint the cousins, but we're definitely*

finding something else to wind around the door next Harvest Eve. At least he knew for certain now that this wasn't Pheneras' work. It had been here a long time.

He turned away from it, baffled, and found himself staring at a skull-face peering out of another twisted tree on the stream's opposite bank. Incredulous, he moved forward, brushing past pine branches to see another body wound up in a wizened trunk. And another, and another, all along both banks of the stream.

Something crunched underfoot and he started back, looking down to see other bones scattered under the trees, grass and ferns growing up through ribs and skulls. All these bodies, undiscovered, unmourned, must have gone without rites; the whole woods must be lousy with angry shades.

Ilias looked around again, realizing the bones and the bizarre trees with their dead occupants were all tucked close to the water. *Is the curse in the stream? But we both drank out of it, we both ate the fish.* He grimaced at the thought now. But Giliead had waded into the deeper water and Ilias hadn't. That was the only thing they had done differently, the only reason he could think why it had taken Giliead but not him.

Swearing under his breath, he pushed on, following the noxious water toward a thicker grove of trees, dimly seen ahead in the green twilight. From what he could tell, the curse must draw a victim into the forest with something borne in the water, then kill anyone who followed to look for him. That he was doing exactly as the curse expected didn't escape Ilias, but there wasn't anything else he could do. Giliead had to be here somewhere. Ilias refused to believe he was dead. Whatever old curse lived here might be subtle enough to catch a Chosen Vessel but surely not strong enough to kill one.

Then from ahead he heard footsteps crunch on dead leaves. He stepped soundlessly to put his back against a tree, glancing first to make sure it was a harmless beech with no bone collection.

Brush rustled in the grove ahead and he squinted to see. Then suddenly Giliead was wading out of the streambed, his boots muddy and his pants wet to the knee. Ilias stared, stunned into calling out, "Gil! What happened, where were you?"

Giliead came toward him, apparently unhurt though it was hard to tell in the dim light. "You're asking me where I was?" he demanded.

Taken aback at his angry tone, Ilias gestured in confusion. "No. Yes. I was worried. What happened to you?" He moved forward, lowering his sword.

"Nothing happened." Reaching him, Giliead caught his arm, hauling him away from the stream. "I came to look at all this, but it's old, harmless."

"Harmless? Are you kidding?" Ilias protested, trying to look back as Giliead towed him over the uneven ground. He was used to heeding Giliead's instructions in anything to do with curses—if he hadn't, he wouldn't have lived much past his sixteenth year. But Giliead wasn't usually this much of an ass about it. Tired of being dragged like a recalcitrant child, Ilias yanked his arm free, twitching his jerkin back into place. "Something lured you off here with all these...tree-things."

"No, there's nothing wrong," Giliead said flatly.

He reached for Ilias' arm again and Ilias fell back a step by reflex. "But there's still a curse here, right? In the stream?" He looked past Giliead toward the grove. *Either there's a curse or we're both going crazy.* "Why did you go in the middle of the night—"

Caught flat-footed, the punch spun him around and he lost his footing, slamming down into the ground nearly face first. Groggy, he shoved himself up on his hands and knees, swaying dizzily. "I'm guessing there's still a curse," he said thickly.

Ilias had held onto his sword by instinct and it was still under his right hand. He saw Giliead's boot come down on the blade and knew the other would be heading for his ribs. Abandoning the trapped sword he threw himself into a sideways roll and scrambled to his feet. He backed away, saying, "Giliead, listen to me—"

Giliead came toward him, a predatory cast to his face so alien to his normal self that it made him look almost like an entirely different person. "You're under a curse," Ilias tried, "You have to—"

Giliead swung at him but Ilias ducked under the blow, caught Giliead's arm and shifted his weight to send him crashing to the ground. "—Snap out of it!" Ilias finished.

Giliead rolled to his feet with barely a pause and Ilias backed away.

They circled each other and Ilias tried again, "Look, it's me. You're under a curse, it's something in the water or the trees. You just need to concentrate and try to break—" He spun out of the way as Giliead charged him again.

Ilias kept trying, but dodging lunges, ducking under punches, getting thrown down onto the bone-strewn grass, and freeing himself from strangleholds didn't leave much breath for logical arguments or emotional appeals. He had fought Giliead for practice and for fun all his life, but it wasn't giving him any advantage. Giliead didn't seem to feel pain, either; punches to the face, kicks to the gut left him unmoved.

Ilias came to his feet again, braced to meet another charge. His jaw was sore, his arms and chest were scraped and bruised, and he was beginning to get winded. *This is not going well.* Then he saw Giliead scoop up a rock from the streambed about the size of his head. "Oh no, don't—" He ducked sideways but the rock caught him in the shoulder, knocking him flat in the weeds at the edge of the bank. He rolled over, hampered by a right arm numb from the impact, to see Giliead looming over him. He kicked up with both feet, caught the other man in the stomach and sent him staggering back, gaining enough time to roll to his feet.

"Giliead, for the love of—Yow!" His boot slipped on the mud as he made to dodge and the wild swing caught him in the side of the head.

Everything went black, leaving him with just the cold wet gravel against his face and under his hands to tell him he was still conscious. *Oh no.* Being beaten to death was not the end he would have chosen. And he didn't want a curse-ridden Giliead to be the one responsible. Ilias lifted his head, tasting his own blood, getting a hazy view of the ground as his vision slowly cleared. A hand gripped his hair and he realized Giliead was kneeling over him. "You don't want to do this," he said, slurring the words.

"But I do," Giliead breathed into his ear.

Ilias blinked grit out of his eyes, suddenly focusing on the hand planted firmly in the dirt only a few inches away from his face, the copper and leather archer's brace on the wrist. The olive leaves etched into it were a match for the designs on Ilias' own armbands. *He's wearing that wrong,* he thought woozily. Giliead drew his bow with his other arm. Then with sudden clarity, *it's not him.*

The realization came with a rush of equal parts relief and terror. There were curses that masked identity, but Ilias had been so convinced it was something affecting Giliead's mind that he hadn't even considered another possibility. Ilias made himself go limp, hoping whoever this was didn't just decide to snap his neck

since he wasn't providing any more entertainment. After a moment the man shook him roughly by the hair, then pulled him up off the ground. Ilias twisted and smashed an elbow back into his face. The grip on his hair released and Ilias shoved off the ground, scrambling out of reach. He landed in a half-crouch and turned to put a tree at his back.

The man wiped his face with a sleeve, though the blow hadn't even given him a bloody nose. "I wasn't done yet anyway," he said, watching Ilias with that predatory expression so disconcerting to see on Giliead's face.

Except it's not quite Giliead's face, Ilias thought, eyeing him intently, looking for the subtle wrongness he knew was there now. The archer's brace on the left arm instead of the right was just the most obvious. He looked for the girl's bloodstain on Giliead's shirt and saw it was on the wrong side too; he hadn't noticed it earlier because the bad light made it hard to see against the red-brown cloth. *It's a...mirror image. As if I'm looking at his reflection in water.* He slipped a hand under his shirt and pulled his belt knife. "I think I'm done," he said through gritted teeth, and shoved to his feet.

The duplicate surged toward him with a growl and Ilias slammed into him and drove the knife up under his breastbone as the bigger man's weight pushed him back into the tree. The duplicate gasped in shock and Ilias shoved him away, breathing hard.

The blade was buried in the man's chest to the hilt, but the fluid leaking from it was thick and green. It gave off a foul odor, like plants rotting in bog water. Ilias met the curseling's astonished gaze and said, "I thought so."

It lunged toward him again, but stopped short with a gasp, then staggered back. It fell to its knees, fumbling at the blade. Ilias pushed away from the tree, watchfully evaluating its attempts to stand. When he was sure it wasn't going to get any further than clawing at the grass and writhing, he circled around it, limping over to collect his sword. His ribs stabbed him as he bent over to pick it up and his head throbbed from that last blow. He spat out some blood, took a deep breath to slow his pounding heart, then turned back.

It was still trying to get up but the thick green ichor puddled around it, leaving it shrunken and its skin loose, as if it was a punctured wine skin. Its clothes, even the leather and metal, had

shrunk and wrinkled too; it didn't even appear that human anymore, which made it much easier to look at.

Ilias stopped at the edge of the growing puddle of ichor and leaned on his sword. "What did you do to him?"

It looked up at him, baring its teeth. "You'll never find him."

So he's still alive. Ilias looked away to hide his relief. "I don't know, you seemed anxious to keep me out of that grove. I think I'll try there."

It snarled at him, making another wild grab, but its arm fell off. The sickening smell drove Ilias back another step. The abrupt movement had used up the last of its strength and it sank back into the puddle, the last remnants of humanity vanishing.

A crack and a strangled yell from the trees ahead spun him around. *That was Gil.* He bolted for the grove.

Past the first curtain of trees and brush, the ground sloped down. Ilias fought his way through clinging vines to see the stream formed a large pool, choked and foul with weeds. Branches thrashed on the other side of the water as a familiar form grappled with one of the curseling trees. Ilias plunged toward it, calling out, "Gil!" though he had never tried to kill a tree before and had no idea where to start.

Wrestling with a whip-like branch trying to pierce his chest, Giliead looked up, shouting frantically, "Ilias, no! Don't let it touch you."

Ilias slid to an abrupt halt, staring in horror as he realized two of the sharp branches had already pierced Giliead's flesh, one burrowing into his thigh and another through his right upper arm, blood welling up around the foul wood. Giliead forced the writhing branch down, managing to free one hand. He reached out, saying with a gasp, "Give me your sword."

Ilias ducked in, slamming the hilt solidly into Giliead's palm as the branch whipped free and darted toward him. The wood slammed across his back but he twisted away, then another branch suddenly sprang up to curl around his ankle, yanking him off his feet.

Ilias hit the ground hard but saw Giliead use the instant of the curseling's distraction to drive the sword down under the roots. Half-sitting up, Ilias caught a glimpse of something green and horrible moving in the cavity under the tree.

A groan came from under the earth and a foul odor of rot filled

the air. With a piercing crack the trunk split and the branches writhed wildly and drooped, all motion dying away.

Ilias pushed to his feet, dragging the nest of branches aside to get to Giliead. With gritted teeth, Giliead worked the wood out of his upper arm. He gasped as it came free, shaking his head with relief, his frayed braids flying. "That...was different."

"Different? That's a new word for it." Ilias was so giddy with relief he hardly knew what either one of them was saying. He took the sword from Giliead to awkwardly cut away the branch piercing his thigh. Giliead waved him away and pulled it out himself, making an inarticulate noise in his throat at the pain. Blood welled but Ilias could see it hadn't gone in as deep as he had feared. He stepped in to put an arm around Giliead's waist and Giliead grabbed his shoulder for support as Ilias hauled him away from the trunk. The thing under it began to leak that sour green fluid. "There's bodies in trees all up and down this water, do you think there's a curseling under every one?"

"No, I can't smell any other curselings. I think the curse was carried by the water from this one." Giliead leaned heavily on him, wincing. "I don't remember much of it. I left camp, came up here. I could smell the curseling, I went right to it. But instead of killing it... The next thing I knew the tree was trying to eat me."

Ilias nodded, hearing his own suppositions confirmed. "It made a duplicate of you and tried to kill me. Maybe you woke up when I killed it."

"It made a what and did what?" Giliead demanded, then they both froze.

In the silence Ilias heard it again. A low groan, a human groan, from further into the grove. Giliead eased away from him and Ilias pushed cautiously forward, weaving around the trees, Giliead limping after him.

Following the edge of the pool where it wound further into the grove, Ilias glimpsed movement. Another step revealed the source and he stopped, glancing up at Giliead.

It was the wizard Pheneras. He was wound up in one of the trees, pierced in a dozen places, the sharp branches weaving in and out of him. Some were broken off as if he had fought it long and hard, and blood stained the once fine material of his pants, shirt and overvest. Near the base of the trunk was a second Pheneras, slumped over in a heap, half its head bearing the sharp features and

dark stringy hair of the wizard, the other half in the process of dissolving into green ooze.

Ilias looked at Giliead in time to see him swallow with difficulty. He glanced at Ilias, brow lifted, saying, "It did that to me?"

Ilias just nodded. Giliead shook his head with a grimace and reached for the sword. Ilias handed it over and Giliead limped forward, close enough to grab the real Pheneras' hair and jerk his head upright. Ilias twitched but the tree didn't react to Giliead's presence. Looking closer, he saw the branches drooped, no longer trying to force a way deeper into the wizard's flesh. Giliead was right, it had been just one curseling, connected to all the trees by the water.

Pheneras' eyes blinked and opened, staring uncomprehending at them. Giliead asked, "Did you know this was here?"

Pheneras drew a rattling breath, then his lips parted in a rictus smile. "No, it's old, older than any of us. Finding it was a happy accident. I saw it call you, I watched you fight it all night until it wore you away and took you in its embrace. But I lingered too long, and it seized me too."

Giliead was silent a moment, then nodded to himself. He said, "If you'd known it was here, I would have left you like this," and thrust the sword into Pheneras' chest.

Taking the head was awkward but they managed it. Since Giliead needed Ilias to lean on and they only had three usable arms between them, Ilias broke his rule about not carrying wizard heads, and said only, "I hope you remembered to bring a bag this time." Giliead grumbled a retort Ilias didn't bother to listen to.

Making their stumbling progress back through the forest, Ilias tried to make plans for when they could leave this motherless place. Once Giliead's wounds were cleaned and bound it would take him a few days to be able to walk. Then they would need to do the rites for all these bodies, to free any trapped shades wandering the woods. It was going to take days.

Ilias realized it was only last night that Giliead had said it was always others who got hurt, never him. Ilias said, "Well, it's not just others. You get hurt, too. Happy now?"

Giliead snorted ruefully. "Oddly enough, not really."

end

About the Author

Martha Wells is the author of over a dozen fantasy novels, including the Books of the Raksura series (*The Cloud Roads*, *The Serpent Sea*, *The Siren Depths*), *The Wizard Hunters*, and the nebula-nominated *The Death of the Necromancer*, as well as the YA fantasies, *Emilie and the Hollow World* and *Emilie and the Sky World*. She has had stories in *Black Gate*, *Realms of Fantasy*, *Stargate Magazine*, *Lightspeed Magazine*, and in the anthologies *Elemental*, *Tales of the Emerald Serpent*, and *The Other Half of the Sky*. She has also written media-tie-ins *Stargate Atlantis: Reliquary*, *Stargate Atlantis: Entanglement*, and *Star Wars: Razor's Edge*. Her most recent books are a two-volume collection of novellas set in the Books of the Raksura world, *Stories of the Raksura I: The Falling World & The Tale of Indigo and Cloud* and *Stories of the Raksura II: The Dead City & The Dark Earth Below*. Her website is www.marthawells.com.